

RED-HEAD NURSE

Red-head Pat Merriford, the heroine of this new romantic novel, was quick-tempered and loving, with an extraordinary capacity for landing herself in difficult situations. For the sake of loyalty she defended a girl she disliked; she found herself opposed to a doctor whom she could not help admiring.

Where she gave love in her own impulsive fashion she was rebuffed and hurt, and when she had flung herself into new work in a private ward of the hospital where she nursed, she was caught in currents of attraction and dislike which complicated her private and official life. Yet she was a lovable creature—in fact quite one of Ray Dorien's most delightful characters.

By the same author

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VOICE OF THE CHARMER
THE DOOR FROM ZANZIBAR
ROAD TO THE RAINBOW
VENTURE OF THE HEART
CHALLENGE TO LOVE
NOT SAINTS, SWEET LADY
LOVE IS A MASQUERADE
VENTURING ABROAD
VENTURING TO NEW ZEALAND
VENTURING TO CANADA
GOLD FOR MIRANDA

HEART'S CONTENT
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ANCHOR AT HAZARD
HOLD THINE OWN
HALF MY APRIL
ABOVE ALL BARGAINS
FEATHER TO THE HEEL
PAM TAKES A CHANCE
BRIDAL WREATH
DIMPLE IN HER CHEEK
GALLANT TO BE GAY
REWARD OF MY FOLLY
SWEETHEART FROM AFAR
LADDER OF DESIRES
VENTURING TO AUSTRALIA
LIGHT THE BRIGHT CANDLES

RAY DORIEN

Red-Head Nurse



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON
1918

*Printed by Latinier, Trend & Co., Ltd., Plymouth
for the publishers W. H. Allen & Co., Ltd.
Essex Street, London, W.C.2*

CHAPTER ONE

PAT MERRIFORD had taken her troubles to the bridge over the River Thames ever since her first day at St. Antholin's Hospital. She liked to lean over the balustrade and watch the shipping in the Pool, to look at the four white towers which had seen so much tragedy, and forget the dreadful things which always happened to her.

In the terrifying depression of First Year, since she had first lost herself in the long, bewildering corridors of an eighteenth-century building which had thrown out offshoots in all directions, several incidents stood out. She had slipped on the polished floor in front of one of the Registrars when she was carrying a kidney dish; she had laid up a trolley with the wrong instruments; she had burnt the patients' breakfast porridge during that terrific flying-round before the Day Sister came on; she had mixed diet sheets, and worse still, dared to argue about them.

But the worst time of all was the previous evening when she had done that dreadful thing to Dr. Kent Willerby.

Of course she knew the sound of his step, recognized his dark good looks, his restrained, controlled expression. No one could ever tell what Dr. Willerby was thinking. But his deep low voice carried beyond the querulous, impatient note of old Sir Hubert.

It was not often that he did theatre work, although he was a surgeon, and it was her first time.

This was an emergency appendectomy.

She had handed him one wrong instrument after another, then she had dropped the sterilized scissors. That meant boiling them up again. Sister had saved the occasion, it was true, but Pat had been covered with confusion. Above the white mask, she knew her face was turning pink. (She had the delicate skin which goes with red hair, and the blood had slowly swept up above her white collar to the high white cap, while her eyes, of the colour of New Zealand jade as Lee Gauntley liked to tell her, grew bright with the tears which she knew she must not shed.)

And then to hear his words after the operation was over, through the door of the sluice, when she was dealing with the dirty trolley, those unforgettable words, "that ham-handed nurse—the red-head."

Pat sighed even now at the memory. Sometimes she thought she would never be a nurse, pass those terrifying examinations, deal with the continual emergencies which seemed designed to expose her ignorance. But ever since her brother Tom's illness as a boy she had wanted to be a nurse. Tom was three years older than she was, as determined in his dream as she had been in hers. Their father, retired from the Navy, his red hair turning sandy, grumbled at them both and wondered where they had inherited their impulsive determination to go their own way.

"Who gave us red hair?" Pat would inquire gaily.

(She propped her elbows on the balustrade. The wind blew her dark blue cloak back from its crossways straps over her shoulders, puffed at her heavy linen frock, and

set the red hair waving underneath the stiff white cap.) She would try painstakingly for weeks, then something would happen in a moment to undo her good work. Like last night, or rather this morning when she had been on night duty. That episode with Dr. Kent Willerby the previous evening, and then disgrace with Sister Gilchrist.

Pat was one of those who found night duty exhausting. Her quiet little dark friend Ann exclaimed: "But it's usually more peaceful at night."

"All right for you," Pat said mournfully. "You write up your notes and do your bandages. At night everyone's ringing bells and being sick and bringing casualties in for me."

About half-past four in the morning she had gone into the kitchen. The little galley with its orderly array of domestic equipment was restful after the long shadowed ward. She would make some cocoa. Through the window she could dimly see the shape of the old plane trees in the flagged courtyard, relic of the early days of the hospital.

Leaning against the pane she saw the dim lights in the rows of the windows, heard the distant clang of the lift, felt again the appeal of the old building.

"Ugly, inconvenient, in the wrong place," one of the nurses had described it. "But there's something about St. Antholin's that gets you."

Pat stretched her arms in a long luxurious movement after the tension of the happenings in the ward, and two masculine arms came round her waist, and a laughing voice with an accent she recognized said: "Guess who?"

"Lee Gauntley," she gasped.

She gave a violent start, the milk boiled over the saucepan on to the clean floor, and she swung round to give the young New Zealand houseman a smart tap on the cheek.

"What the heck do you think you're playing at?" she demanded crossly. "Look at that milk. And I'll bet there's no more in the frig. here. And I can't go down to the kitchen now to get some."

"Don't be cross with me," said the young man unabashed. "On a night like this, to see a vision like that through the door, stretching her arms, asking to be embraced——"

"I didn't. Oh, do go away," said Pat, on the floor with the swabbing cloth.

"I couldn't leave you if I tried."

"You can, and you will. I've been on my feet all night. I'm tired, and you——"

"I always heard that you had a temper, and now I know it," he said with amusement.

"If a man hasn't got more sense than to choose the moment to put his arm round a girl when she's watching a saucepan of milk——" blazed Pat.

"So I didn't choose the right moment, is that it?" he teased.

"I didn't say so. For two pins, I'd throw this at you."

"And you couldn't throw straight."

He was standing with his back to the door, a tall, broad-shouldered young man with black hair cut very short, a square face in which gleamed strong white teeth.

That challenge was one which Pat, trained by a sporting father and brother, could not resist. The swabbing cloth was full of the wiped-up milk, she aimed well

and threw it high at him. He ducked smartly and the cloth descending met Night Sister Gilchrist full in the face.

Lee Gauntley made a quick apology and vanished. Pat suffered angry reproof in silence, but suppressed rage.

And then poor old No. 17 died as quietly as he had lived and suffered, and she could have wept for him if she had not had the living to consider.

She could not rest in her room after breakfast, and when she had bought stamps and talc powder, and a birthday present for Tom, she knew she must soothe her mood by going on to the bridge.

The changing waters of the tide fascinated her, there was the feeling of the centuries, the movement of traffic. Her own difficulties fell into place.

As she turned reluctantly, she saw behind her the figure of a young man in a grey flannel suit.

"Hi!" he said, with unusual diffidence. "I was waiting until you'd turn round."

It was Lee Gauntley, the New Zealander.

"Pity you hadn't done that last night," said Pat.

"I'm terribly sorry you got into such a row. It was all my fault. I wanted to apologize to you."

"I should think so," said Pat.

He looked unusually serious, usually those white teeth of his were gleaming in some joke.

Pat's temper never lasted more than a few moments. Indeed, except for the turn of his phrase, she might have forgotten the incident.

She began to laugh, her head tilted back so that the morning sun shone on her young throat above the white collar of her linen frock.

"Her face, oh, dear! It was terrible, but—so funny.

I don't suppose I shall ever live that down. The things that happen to me! I'll never be a nurse," she went on dolefully.

"Yes, you will," he said. "Only, I shan't feel right until you've said you'll forgive me—for getting you into a scrape, not for putting my arm round you."

"You housemen have a nerve," gasped Pat.

"Well, you must expect that, mustn't you? We're all nerve specialists. Come and have a coffee."

The only convenient place for a coffee near at hand in the business district which surrounded St. Antholin's was a little corner shop with tables very close together, known as Joey's.

"I've seen you lots of times, but you've never taken much notice of me. No one could miss your hair," said Lee Gauntley. "Will you have dinner with me one night? Not till the beginning of the month, though. I have an allowance from a strict old grandpa* in New Zealand, and I'm spent out."

Pat nodded in understanding. She did not feel very interested in Lee, but after all, an invitation to dinner was something.

"Where do you live? I mean, where's your home?" he asked her.

"In Kent, down near the sea. My father runs a chicken farm. At least, I think my mother does most of the business side of it."

He chuckled.

"We go in for chickens, too. Is your brother on the farm?"

"Tom? Good gracious no. He was in the Navy, now he's a radio engineer. He's got just one bee in his bonnet."

There was tenderness in her laughing explanation. "What's that?" Lee was watching her expressive face.

"When he was a boy he heard the explorer Willerby—you know, Dr. Willerby's father—talk about his Antarctic expedition, and ever since then Tom has been crazy to go. He's even written to the Committee about the new expedition."

There was a glow of pride in her eyes.

"I've heard Kent Willerby talk about that," said young Gauntley. "Not my cup of tea. Of course, he's a great chap for studying research into health conditions. Long dark winters, lack of sun, effect on metabolism, how to counteract vitamin deficiencies—that's his line. He'd bury himself in research if he couldn't go on the new expedition."

"Is he going too? I didn't know that," asked Pat, suddenly interested.

She was trying not to yawn, her eyelids were pricking with that familiar sensation after night duty, but she always wanted to hear more about Kent Willerby.

"We hear a lot about it. There's a chap, you must have heard of him, Jake Westbrow, made a packet with some cheap stores. He's the man who's given such a lot of money for the new wing, and now he's backing this expedition. Probably wants to get into the limelight, win a title. There's a Government grant and various companies backing it, too. Quite a big thing in its way. How is your brother hoping to get in? He's a bit young for it."

"Tom? He's three years older than I am," said Pat. "But in his quiet way he gets on with things. He's been to the head of his old school, and he's written to the

committee of the expedition, and he—well, Tom just won't be done."

"And he really wants to be stuck down there, isolated for nearly a year! Darkness and cold and all that, no girls—" Lee Gauntley shook his head.

"Tom wouldn't mind," said Pat. "I must go."

She was trying hard not to yawn as they came out of the café to cross the old flagged pavement before the entrance to the hospital.

Lee went off to the side door, waving and shouting: "I'll be seeing you."

Here, in what had been known to hundreds of occupants of St. Antholin's as the Alley, cars were parked while workmen were busy on the scaffolding of the new wing.

Pat heard a voice behind her, a low, deep voice.

"I thought I recognized you."

She swung round in surprise at the voice of Dr. Kent Willerby. She had never seen him at such close range before. He had stepped from his car, obviously, the keys still swung in his hand. He had a quick way of walking, she knew, so he must have overtaken her.

Pat's heart beat fast. Unconsciously her eyes were pleading. Surely he wouldn't remember the tragedy of the happening yesterday at the emergency operation.

As he was so near she could see the darkness of the blue eyes, deep-set under straight dark brows. His nostrils were slightly flared, a sign of ambition, she thought. His mouth and chin were firm, betraying the determination which had led him to this position at St. Antholin's.

"Yes?" breathed Pat, wondering vaguely if she had

done anything else wrong. Her expression was so anxious, almost pleading, that the first glimmer of a smile came to the face of the man beside her.

She had never seen him smile before, she realized. She had watched him, intent, serious, beside a patient's bed, she had seen him impatient, angry at her clumsiness as he had been yesterday. But now at this moment the man she had admired from a distance, almost with a touch of schoolgirl hero-worship, was human, approachable.

"Yes?" she repeated. Then, remembering, she said: "Yes, Dr. Willerby?"

Again that odd, almost reluctant, smile came to his eyes.

"You needn't look so frightened," he said. "I thought you were taking things to heart, far too much, yesterday. A few words of blame don't matter. Cheer up."

He had passed on briskly, treating her as if she were a child. Pat gazed after him, aglow with relief, charmed by his recollection of her.

She loved him then, impulsively, foolishly, hopelessly, from that moment.

She repeated his words to Ann, her friend and senior, who was studying in the Physio-Therapy Department, when her spell of night duty was over.

Ann, that serene, dark, compact little person, said sagely: "You know half the students are in love with him. Don't think you're the only pebble on the beach."

"Of course I don't. I didn't," said Pat hotly. "I was just so surprised, that's all. And I still think it was the kindest thing to do, for anybody, especially for a chump like me."

Ann looked at her friend, at the eyes ablaze with

enthusiasm, at the bright hair, at the vitality which made Pat a notable figure at any time.

"He doesn't take any notice of girls," said Ann. "His mother is rather an odd person, I believe. Don't you remember his father was a big noise on some expedition somewhere? Then he came home and died, people said of a broken heart. Dr. Willerby may be kind when he remembers. Probably wouldn't have noticed you if it hadn't been for that hair of yours."

Pat laughed, combing out the thick hair and wishing that it didn't need cutting again.

"Anyone would think that was the only thing about me. Runs in the family, like hot temper and jumping out of frying-pans into fires."

"Well, it does make people notice you," said Ann wistfully. "And whatever you do, you do it so hard that you nearly fall over yourself doing it."

"I didn't know that I'd scrubbed old Robert's bed-sores too hard, I didn't mean it," moaned Pat.

"And when you fell over, carrying the kidney dish, just when Sir Hubert came along."

"Don't, don't remind me," Pat begged in horror.

The next word Pat exchanged with Dr. Kent Willerby was at the hospital rugger match. Pat had been packed in with the other cheering girls after the match of the season. She was climbing down from the stands, when one of the girls turned round to call: "Come on, Merriford. We're late."

Kent Willerby, hands in pocket of old tweed coat, pipe in mouth, had been watching the match.

Pat was climbing down towards him and he gave her a hand over the bench in an abstracted manner.

"Merriford?" he asked her, with a slight puzzled frown. "I've heard that name before."

"Was it my brother, Tom Merriford?" asked Pat eagerly, forgetting her awe and her lateness, in her enthusiasm. "He told me he had to go before the committee who are planning the next Antarctic expedition. He'd be willing to do anything."

"So it seemed," said Dr. Willerby, shortly.

In the rush of cheering students she was swept away from him. Pat wondered then if she had said too much, and was impatient to go home for her next week-end leave to hear Tom's news.

Home was a Victorian double-fronted house on the outskirts of a seaside resort. When it had been built by Pat's grandfather it had been surrounded by park and orchards and farm land. If it had not been for that land and that house inherited by Pat's mother, there would have been no home for the Merriford family. And if it had not been for her business sense, renting land, growing fruit, raising chickens, there would not have been much in the home for Pat and Tom. Captain Merriford's restless temperament did not take kindly to chickens. Many were the odd jobs he had tried, from all of which he returned with resignation to what the family called his "feathered foes".

I'm like Dad, Pat thought sometimes, almost with a touch of fear. Rushing at things making a fool of myself. Tom has more sense, like Mother.

Tom called to her as she almost fell out of the window of the small train which had brought her from the junction.

"How's tricks?" asked Tom, beaming up at her.

His colouring was not as brilliant as hers, and he had her mother's soft, grey eyes.

"I've had a dreadful time," said Pat. "I'll never be a nurse."

"Always said, pity your poor patients," he teased her.

They flung away from the station, and Pat drew in the strong breeze with delight.

"You look pleased with yourself," she observed.

He nodded. His brown hands were firm on the wheel, his open-necked shirt showed his strong, brown throat.

With the instinct of love, Pat demanded: "You've heard something. Tom, you've pulled it off!"

He nodded again. Tom never had many words.

"You're going, actually going on that expedition!" Pat almost screamed the words in her excitement. "I can't believe it. Tell."

"I pulled every string I could," Tom said quietly. "But it was old Hammerton, you remember the Head? Said my record was good. And he handed me on to Willerby—what's the matter?"

"Dr. Kent Willerby?" said Pat in awe.

That her brother should speak of the great in this careless way astonished her.

"Apparently it's always been his idea to go on from where his father left off. And what he wants to do is to study the effect of the darkness, the long Antarctic winter on the human system——"

"I know all that," said Pat impatiently. "Isn't he at St. Antholin's, and haven't the students got it all by heart!"

"Well, there were others on the committee, of course, Elkman and Diderot, he's a Frenchman who was on some previous 'do', and I had to be vetted. I shall be a kind of dogsbody, I've naval experience, radio service, bit of a carpenter, and they're taking me."

Pat knew that his quiet words concealed his excitement.

"Oh, Tom. How thrilling. I'm so glad for you," she cried. "But it won't be for months yet?"

"Early next year. There's no end of preparation already done, only it wasn't in the news," he reminded her. "I wouldn't have been chosen if they hadn't been let down by a chap who was ill. I'm a spare, an extra."

"And the youngest. Tom, just what you wanted! What did Mother say?"

Tom's face sobered.

"She's pleased, of course. But you know good old Mum. I know she's thinking about what needed doing round the place, and how I shall live with ice and penguins round me."

"And Dad said 'you'll be better off with those penguins than I am with these darned chickens,'" laughed Pat with knowledge. "What did you think of Dr. Willerby?"

She tried to keep her voice light as she mentioned his name.

"He's not one of the most important members of the committee, of course," aid Tom. "But there must be a medical officer with us, and he's dead keen. The man who's putting up a lot of the money is Westbrow."

Pat nodded, remembering Lee Gauntley's words about him.

They had come round by the turn in the lane and were facing the sea. Pat jumped out to meet her mother, her grey hair blowing in the wind, hands in the pockets of her cardigan coat.

Pat ran to her and hugged her. There was something

so firm and rock-like and reassuring about Mrs. Merriford. In all the upsets of war, which Pat hardly remembered, and her father's naval career, suddenly cut short, through all his succession of odd jobs, through building and business difficulties, defaulting tenants and hen sickness, her mother had stood firm.

"Darling, Tom's been telling me. Isn't it exciting?"

Mrs. Merriford nodded.

"You're dying for your tea, I expect," she said. "The garage door won't fasten properly, Tom, but don't bother now."

He regarded it competently.

"I'll have a go at it after tea," he said.

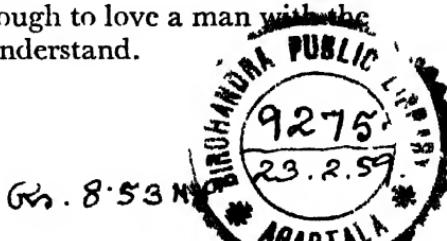
It had always been like that in the family. Tom took to the practical jobs as to the manner born.

"He'll be making houses for the penguins," said Pat. With the joy of release from discipline, from study and from the tiresome repetition of the wards, she appreciated the welcome from her busy mother, the thought which made out of the shell of an old house, shabby inherited furniture, and a trying husband, some invaluable and priceless quality.

Perhaps I grow up a little each time, Pat thought. And she wondered suddenly what Dr. Kent Willerby would have thought of this untidy, shabby but welcoming home. She would never know.

Her mother was afraid for Tom. That was what loving meant. Tom was reaching out to his heart's desire, this strange adventure in the far white south, and his mother would put no barrier in his way, even while she longed to hold him back.

A girl who was foolish enough to love a man with the same crazy dream could understand.



"Ahoy!" cried her father from the passage from the garden door.

"Hullo, darling. I've brought your tobacco. And your sweets, Mum."

Somehow, Pat's pay, which looked so good on paper, melted away with deductions for insurance, uniform, books, with expenditure on stockings, toothpaste, fares, odd coffees and the theatre. But she could never forget the gifts for home.

"You shouldn't, Pat. I know you're always hard up," smiled her mother. "The meal's ready."

"Don't call it 'meal'. Makes me think of night duty," said Pat luxuriously.

They went into the homely dining-room, where Gypsy the cat gave a restrained welcome to Pat, but purred affectionately round Tom.

"Can't think why you encouraged that stray," snorted Captain Merriford.

He was taller than his wife. He was quick of speech, while his wife was quiet and thoughtful.

"Poor old Gypsy," said Tom.

They sat at the round table, loaded with ham and home-made scones, eggs, fruit and cream.

"Not a bit like St. Antholin's," Pat sighed rapturously.

The conversation ranged from the latest news of Pat's patients, for Mrs. Merriford miraculously remembered names as if they were those of her friends, to the vagaries of egg production.

Mrs. Merriford wondered what Tom would be eating on the expedition.

"It's going to be run on efficient lines," said Tom, stung into reply at last. "Willerby is up to date."

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"Of course he was brought up in the tradition," said her father. "Though what good tradition is in this present world, I can't see. But old Willerby led a man's life—while he had it. Pity he died so young."

"Lady Willerby opened our bazaar last month," observed Mrs. Merriford. "Another slice of ham, Tom?"

"Mother, I didn't know you knew her," said Pat, aglow at this remote link with her hero. "What is she like?"

Her mother was surprised.

"She came in place of someone else. Small, dainty, perfectly white hair. Like a little French marquise. They say she has a lovely house on the other side of Davant. About thirty miles, isn't it, Gray?"

"Is she good-looking? Dr. Kent is really handsome."

Her mother gave her a quick glance.

"Yes, she is, but it's in rather a cold, distant way."

"Her husband was knighted after his achievements, then died quite suddenly," said Tom.

"It must have broken her heart to lose him like that," said Pat slowly.

Again her mother glanced at her, as if there were a change in her daughter at each return home.

As usual, the week-end passed too swiftly.

In the evening the Captain and Tom settled down for their game of chess, but Tom talked of ice and radio conditions, of men who had made the previous expeditions, of his heroes, until the Captain slammed his hand on the chess-board.

"You'd better get it out of your system," he said with that touch of charm which made Pat think, after all, he could be a darling.

The descriptions, the diagrams, the maps, the details were strange to Pat, but she knew she would not have been as passionately interested if Kent Willerby had not been with the expedition.

Sunday meant church and a walk by the sea, the roast dinner at midday, then repacking her case with her mother's cake, the frantic discovery that it was later than she thought, and she was back at the junction, being seen off by Tom.

Pat felt the inevitable sense of flatness on return. As she was going in at the main entrance by the Porter's Gate, past the notice-boards with the list of names on duty, Lee Gauntley met her.

"Don't forget our date," he said jubilantly. "End of the month is next week. Thank heaven for my old grandaddy in Christchurch."

It was a very special date. Pat was used to meals in Soho, to queuing for the theatre gallery, to a top seat high up in the Albert Hall.

But Lee Gauntley had other ideas.

"I've never been in a place like this. You'll be hard up for the whole of next month," Pat commented, looking at the mirrored walls, the attendant waiters, the tropical plants, the silver and glass and enjoying it frankly.

"As long as you're pleased," laughed Lee. "I'm glad we had that blazing row. It gave me the chance of seeing the real you."

"I'm always getting into scrapes," confessed Pat. "I don't know why it is, but things go wrong."

"You do things suddenly, without thinking," he nodded wisely. "You're telling me!"

And they both laughed happily, companionably.

Pat was glad that she was wearing her pale green dress. She had borrowed Ann's nylons and Sylvie Richards's ear-rings to do honour to the occasion.

He spoke of his careful grandfather, his bevy of sisters, his favourite being Nina. He was one of a large family from what he called a farm in the South Island, and when he mentioned casually the thousands of chickens raised on the incubator system, merely a sideline, Pat said: "Thousands! You ought to talk to my father about our few hundred. He hates them, says he doesn't know why he ever started it. But he was wounded in the war, and he has to live in the country, and my mother is really the brains of the business."

"I'd like to meet them," he said, readily, indeed too readily, for Pat's sudden awareness of him.

She stared at him, her eyes bright in the reflection from the chandeliers.

Flirtations she could cope with gaily. They were a natural and necessary relief to the background of St. Antholin's.

Surely this wasn't anything more!

But he was a pleasant companion for talking or dancing, and the time sped by.

It was raining when they came out of the restaurant.

"We must have a taxi," said Lee.

Pat, still stunned by the size of the bill which Lee had paid so nonchalantly, protested.

"There's the Underground, and it's only a few steps——"

"Leave this to me," he said savagely.

In the taxi he put his arm round Pat.

"Thank you for giving me such a lovely time," she sighed.

"Who wouldn't? Do you go out with any of the other lads, Pat?"

"Of course," she answered gaily. "We go to the pictures and concerts and to coffee bars."

"But there's not one, not one special one, is there?"
Pat was silent.

She could not tell him that there was only one for whom her heart beat faster, one whose step she would recognize, she thought, if she were dead in her grave, one who had stopped to encourage her in her depression, one who hardly knew that she existed—Kent Willerby.

But he was never likely to notice her, just a red-headed nurse who was always landing into scrapes.

"Is there?" Lee pleaded.

"No, not really. I like them all," said Pat, with more gaiety than she felt, but disturbed by Lee's nearness.

"Pat, I think you're grand. None of the others are a patch on you. I'd like you to be my girl—you'll come out with me again?"

"My goodness, not often at this rate," said Pat, evading him.

She was glad that they had reached the hospital gate. She had a late pass, she had signed the book. Or had she?

A terrible thought came to Pat. In all the rush and excitement of getting dressed, of borrowing the earrings, had she or had she not signed the late book?

"That's torn it," she said miserably.

Lee's attempt at kissing her was destined to be ineffective in this realization of both of them at her latest scrape.

"Lord, Pat, you do land yourself into them," he said, more companionably.

"I'll get in through the buttery window," said Pat.

It was still called the buttery window, although actually it led into the corridor at the base of the Nurses' Wing. Once, no doubt, in its early history it had held barrels and tubs and stores.

Now came the difficult moment—the ordeal of the buttery window. It meant a scramble over some stones, along the wall near the scaffolding and there, at the angle nearest the Alley, was the ledge beneath the window.

"Help me up," whispered Pat.

She scrambled on to the ledge. Alas for the borrowed nylons!

"You promised to kiss me when I brought you home," he asserted.

"Here? Now? Don't be so silly," said Pat, trying not to laugh.

But he had caught her round the waist, so that she had to turn and bend slightly. His lips brushed hers.

It was an amusing picture of a boy and girl at a romantic moment. The girl's unmistakable red hair shone in the light from a car's headlamps.

Pat glanced round startled.

A car was sliding quietly away from the parking place in the Alley, a car Pat recognized. Dr. Kent Willeby must have been called in on some emergency.

Could he have seen her?

Just my luck, thought Pat. And even if he did, it's nothing to him.

CHAPTER TWO

PAT was attached to the ward called after Edward Manthorpe, the Founder of the hospital—the ward familiarly termed “Mannie’s”. She would be there until after Christmas. Some of the patients seemed like old friends now. There was the middle-aged sailor who had celebrated too long and too often for an over-worked liver until he had fallen down a manhole; there was the barrow-boy who had been brought in after a bus accident, whose friends could be relied on to bring in bags of fruit which he offered pleadingly to Pat.

“Go on, red-head,” he would say, his mouth full. “Plenty more where this come from.”

Lee Gauntley’s extra visits to the ward were noted caustically by old Mr. Andrews, who was what he called a “regular”, returning after a previous operation.

“Tain’t my ‘tummy you’re after,” he shouted at Lee as he left him. “It’s you girl with the red hair.”

“And you would say that just when Sister was coming in,” Pat scolded the old man when the coast was clear again. “As if I hadn’t got enough to bother me with exams coming on soon!”

“They’ll never let a girl like you go.” grunted the old man. “With your hair, they’d save on the electric light bills.”

Sister Thomasson made Pat’s life difficult with sharp

eyes on every mistake, but as Christmas neared she unbent to gossip over the decorations for the ward, the singing at the carol practice.

"I wonder who we shall be having instead of Dr. Willerby," she said. "I think it's crazy for him to go off on this Antarctic business."

"But it's wonderful," Pat forgot about contradicting Sister in her enthusiasm. "I mean, it's more sensible than a war, isn't it? Exploring and studying conditions—I think it's grand."

"Thank you for your defence, Nurse Merriford."

Pat had been detained by Sister Thomasson just beside the lift, and Kent Willerby had apparently walked down the stairs just behind them.

Sister Thomasson spoke coldly, as if some of the frost on the decorations in the wards had affected her.

"Nurse Merriford is bound to be enthusiastic, as her brother is going with the expedition."

For the second time Pat met that astonishing, rare, but welcome smile.

"No wonder I thought I'd seen him before," he said. "Sister, those X-ray negatives—"

Pat faded obediently from the scene, but her heart glowed at his few words, at the thought that he and Tom would be together.

Like the other nurses, Pat was up early on that Christmas morning. Each cloak was turned inside out to show the coloured lining, each nurse carried a gay, lighted paper lantern, as they started to sing their way through the wards. So had nurses done for innumerable Christmases, and Pat felt a bitter-sweetness in the memory of those who had gone before, and a wonder about herself and those who would come after.

The windows were dark on this winter morning, the electric lights gave the wards the effect of a stage, the white pillows were the backgrounds of so many different heads. Patients stared or clapped or smiled. A few lay quiet. Once Pat saw tears on the face of a vigorous old Cockney woman whose language had shocked even the hard-bitten, war-decorated Sister in charge of the Women's Surgical Ward.

"Oh, come all ye faithful," sang the nurses.

They had filed through the Women's Medical, through the ward called "Mannies", on through the Men's Medical known as "Lucien" where the newest and shyest boy of all, who had blushed at the business-like ministrations of the nurses, indulged in an appreciative and daring wolf whistle.

They had to pass along the tiled corridor to the Children's Wing, scurrying now at the thought of a hearty and well-earned breakfast.

Pat, her cap slightly tilted as the result of that hurried early rising, was singing her heart out. Her lantern with its low-burning night-light swung more than the others in her enthusiasm.

At a door leading into the courtyard a group of important personages stood, Matron, one or two of the Governors, a consultant and a registrar, and with them was Kent Willerby.

As they passed the door, a chilly draught blew at Pat's gyrating paper lantern. Suddenly, Dr. Willerby stepped forward, brought his hands together sharply, and crushed the lantern just as the paper had begun to flame. Then he stepped back with an angry glance at Pat. The incident was over so soon that the nurses in front and at the back did not notice it.

Before she could thank him, he had moved away, was talking to the group.

But he must have been looking at her to have been aware of what she herself had not noticed. Could he have hurt his hands? She thought his action had been so swift that he had probably just dirtied them.

Don't I always do something wrong? she thought.

The noise in the Children's Ward was deafening on this day of license. When would she have a chance to thank him for saving her from what might have been an accident?

This was a day of strange jollity, of duties performed at the double, of child patients allowed to shriek, of housemen decorating themselves and every nurse within reach with sprays of mistletoe. This led to appropriate action, which was observed without rancour by Staff Nurses and Sisters until they themselves were surrounded, bedecked and kissed to the great delight of the patients.

Pat had no opportunity to see Kent Willerby until the concert was being given in the Children's Ward. The turkey and Christmas pudding had been eaten, wheel chairs and walking patients crowded the floor. Radio music sounded from the other half-empty wards.

Pat was at the back, ready to slip off to her own ward when the glass door opened behind her, and she knew, as if by instinct, that Kent Willerby was beside her.

"I wanted to see you, to thank you," she began through the chorus which the comic actor was leading.

"You were too busy singing to think of yourself," he said gravely, and this time there was no smile. "There might have been a serious accident."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry. Something always happens to me," said Pat, downcast.

The voices were shouting around them. Hands were beating time, feet were tapping, they were encompassed by sound.

Abruptly, Dr. Willerby opened the glass door and motioned to her to go out before him. As it closed behind them, subduing the sound, he said: "We couldn't talk there."

Pat's heart was beating fast. This was surely a most unreal Christmas Day for her.

He was silent for a moment.

"You're enjoyin' Christmas in hospital, then?" he asked her, almost lamely.

"Oh, yes," said Pat eagerly. "I've always enjoyed Christmas at home, and I used to think it was a shame for people to be in hospital just then. But some would rather be here than at home. Even my old sailor said it was worth ruining his liver for it. And the children love it so."

"Yes, in hospital it's different," he said, almost with indifference. "I can't say that I enjoyed it much myself as a child."

Pat could not conceal her amazement.

"How strange. But how dreadful for you," she said, and then stopped at her appalling frankness, at her implied criticism of his home.

She could not help the colour rising to her face, while she wondered, with all the sweet intensity of this new emotion for him, what he had been like when he was a small boy, and why she had this sense of sadness in him.

"But next Christmas——" he began.

"I know. You'll be with the expedition," she said, and the tone of her voice changed subtly.

He would be thousands of miles away from her. He didn't know how lost that realization of distance made her feel. She hoped he had not noticed the wistfulness in her tone and went on hurriedly: "Isn't it next month that you start? There must be so many preparations."

He nodded.

"It will be February before we get off, I'm afraid. I hate delays. It's the one thing I've always wanted to do. I made up my mind when my father died. A chance like this comes once in a lifetime. So nothing must stand in the way."

"Of course not, nothing could stand in the way," she repeated, wondering at his determined tone.

What could there be to hold Kent Willerby back from carrying out his dream?

His eyes were fixed on her steadily with a curious intentness. She thought he might have gone on to say something else, but the glass door opened behind them, and the surge of voices made conversation impossible. The wheel-chair procession was starting on its way to the various wards, with that sharp contrast of the necessary surface cheerfulness to the reality of pain.

The moment of intimacy with Dr. Willerby was over. She turned to smile good-bye to find that he was still watching her.

All the nurses complained that examinations came so soon after Christmas. Pat tried to look on them as a bad dream, the laying of the trolleys for complaints she had never heard of, the bandaging, the naming of equipment the very sight of which frightened her to silence.

She came away depressed, to meet her depressed friends, and they drank cocoa gloomily together, wondering how life would be possible in the future.

The day came when Sister spoke to Pat. She was wanted in Matron's office, and she went with beating heart, with hot hands and cold feet.

And instead of the ignominious dismissal she expected, it was for the presentation of her first-year belt.

There were wild celebrations in the Nurses' cubicles that night.

The only disappointment for Pat was that Kent Willerby was away on a special course connected with the expedition. Anyway, the change in her status couldn't matter to him.

Pat had never thought she would ever be in charge of a Junior, but the moment had come. And such a Junior.

She was small and fair, with big blue eyes, and she looked up at Pat with admiration. She made Pat feel that she was tall and impressive.

"It's so confusing," she said.

"Everyone is the same the first year," said Pat, busy knitting a sweater for Tom.

"I feel quite lost," said Janet Westbrow.

When Janet mentioned her school, Pat said bluntly: "What in the world made you want to be a nurse? And come here, of all places? I thought girls from Derwent were presented at Court and turned into super secretaries or models until they married millionaires."

Janet smiled sweetly.

"I had to come here because of my father," she chanted. "He thinks it's a fine, noble thing to be a nurse. And what my father says always has to be done."

When Pat told Lee Gauntley about Janet, he whistled. "You know who that little kitten is, don't you?" he inquired, bracing his feet against the leg of the table in the galley where she was checking diets sent up from the kitchen.

"Always come to me if you want to hear any gossip. Daughter of old Westbrow who's giving money for the new wing."

"Where will they extend it next?" said Pat practically, looking out at the unorthodox huddle of tall buildings which had grown up during the centuries. "And do you mean her father has all that money, and she's coming here as a nurse?"

"Comes where she'll meet the attractive coming men of the future," Lee told her.

Pat raised her eyebrows as far as they would go.

"Coming men?" She spoke the fatal words and dodged as Lee lunged towards her.

"Oh, Nurse, No. 12 is coughing and you told me about the tube——"

Janet's scared face appeared at the door, and Pat rushed away to her patient.

It was all very well being friends with Lee, and going out with him, but she didn't want to be swept from the shallow waters of light-hearted flirtation into anything deeper.

All the same, she was surprised when she saw Lee deep in conversation with Janet at the linen cupboard.

When Pat had to remind the girl about the sterilizing, Janet said dolefully: "I wasn't trying to take your beau away from you."

"I don't care if you do," snapped Pat, with a flash of temper. "And it's no good taking housemen seriously."

"Higher game?" asked Janet sweetly, raising her eyebrows.

There were times, Pat thought, when she could almost have disliked Janet. Tiny scraps of conversation, of action, were beginning to crystallize into a different impression of the white kitten.

If Janet wanted Lee Gauntley, then Pat would suffer only in her vanity.

"You see, I know his sister Nina. I met her over here before she was married. She's the kindest person——"

Pat reflected that Janet was not given to praise of anyone in the usual way.

"Old Mr. Gauntley, the grandfather, is determined his grandson's not going to run through the money like his father did, so he clamps down on his allowance."

"Don't I know it?" said Pat, recovering at once. "I had to lend him five shillings for the taxi last time."

"But tonight he's taking you to the 'Caramba', isn't he? He'd be a good match for you."

Pat decided to ignore the emphasis on the last word. "There are those trolleys to lay up," she reminded her Junior. "And a milk drip."

Janet was such a pleasant, innocent fluffy little thing, Pat thought, patronizing her as only a new Second Year would with a First Year. She took her under her wing. Even if Janet did mention so often her father's position, his timber interests in New Zealand, his sudden patronage of the hospital.

"Of course, that's why I'm here," Janet said, ruefully contemplating her broken finger-nails as she stood beside the sterilizer. "He wants to be associated with one of the oldest City hospital. He thinks he might work along to a knighthood. He has his mental picture,

and all the family have to fall in with it. A noble nursing daughter is part of it, my mother is gracious hostess, and she loathes it, and——”

“How queer,” said Pat frankly.

“Whatever happens, I mustn’t fail,” said Janet sadly. “He’d never forgive me. No one in our family must fail at anything.”

“Don’t you want to be a nurse, then? You got through the entrance,”

“I just wonder if I can stick it, that’s all. He’ll be furious with me if I fail.”

At lunch-time Ann said: “I don’t see how you can take that trouble for that creature. She talks of nothing but car racing and holidays abroad. And not just Switzerland, but South Africa and New Zealand. Up-stage all the time.”

“I’d hate to be her,” said Pat honestly.

“You great gump, why?” Ann stared in astonishment.

Pat could not explain that she felt a happy security in her home atmosphere which was lacking in Janet’s life.

“She may look like a white kitten, but she’s out for herself all the time,” said Ann. “Isn’t it sick-making to have rice pudding again when I’m trying to slim, and I’m so hungry!”

“And isn’t Janet trying to get your Lee?”

But Lee continued to stick firmly to Pat, inviting her to a birthday party at the flat in an old house in Hampstead which he shared with three other men.

That evening the place was crowded with men and girls, one man at an old piano, another explaining the workings of a tape recorder to a group sitting on the floor. Pat saw Janet there, enthroned on the end of a

shabby settee, full, flowery skirts of nylon spread round her. Her little mouth curved in a smile, as Ann had described it, a kitten over a saucerful of milk.

"Had to ask her," Lee muttered. "My sister met her when she was over here. Nina even asked her to stay at Christchurch after she got married. Though why Nina should take on a man with two children I don't know. Glad to escape from Grandfather. Look, I'll show you some pictures. Hey, Horse-radish, remove your skeleton from my desk."

Pat was shown snapshots of a tall, grim, elderly man in riding-clothes standing in front of a long veranda.

"Well, I suppose he isn't such a bad sort," Lee said, with a grudging affection.

"That's a good one of Nina, with her stepchildren," Janet said, in her soft voice. "Such a nice girl. I do wish I could see her again."

"Easy enough," said Lee without enthusiasm. "Get your father to take you to New Zealand on his next trip."

"But here I am, and I can't escape," sighed Janet.

"Now you wouldn't be wanting to escape from me, would you?" asked the lively young Irishman beside her.

The dancing began.

Time was rushing away before the departure of the *Foxglove* on the Antarctic expedition and Kent Willerby and Tom would be gone very soon.

As Second Year, Pat could replace Night Staff on the ward, and the responsibility of twelve people weighed on her. Owing to a sudden outbreak of influenza, too, there was a shortage of staff, and Janet Westbow as Junior was more nuisance than help.

One morning Pat was at the window-sill of the

kitchen, rapidly putting the first daffodils she had brought from home into their bowls.

A gleam of spring sunshine was touching windows in the buildings opposite, the tops of cars shone, the scarlet buses gave a splash of vivid colour. Pat saw the well-known car drive away, Kent Willerby would not visit the ward that morning.

Janet said softly at her elbow: "Pity Dr. Willerby won't come in this morning!"

Pat jumped, and dropped the last daffodil.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

She might be impulsive and careless, but one secret she would treasure.

"Kent Willerby never notices *any* of us," said Janet with a soft confidential *camaraderie* which made Pat want to hit her.

"Wouldn't it be terrible if he loved all of us?" she responded lightly.

She did not like the gleam in Janet's soft blue eyes.

"I thought I should meet lots of nice men," she said. "But they're all so busy, or married, or struggling with exams like the housemen. And if ever there's anything promising doing at the linen cupboard, Sister is sure to send me to take temperatures or for the Potty round."

"First year," reminded Pat with as lofty an air as she could assume.

There was to be a send-off party for the expedition. Pat displayed proudly the invitation card to her friends at the midday meal.

The affair was to be held at a hotel near the Park. It was a gusty, windy evening, so that Pat's hair blew round her ears. Her pale green skirts whirled round her as she struggled up the short, imposing flight of steps.

She was not mollified to see an imposing car draw up, to see a door held open by a uniformed chauffeur, and her junior, Janet, descending, in rosy pink, a rose in her unruffled hair.

Pat sped over soft carpets, past mirrors which revealed the worst, to the ladies' room, before Janet sailed in.

"When Daddy said he'd bring me, I quite forgot about you, Pat dear," she said graciously. "We could easily have given you a lift."

"It didn't matter," said Pat with an effort.

Kent Willerby was going away. Tom was going away. Life without the two of them was unthinkable, and there were moments when she did not like Janet.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom, meeting her anxiously at the head of the stairs. "You look like a thundercloud."

"If you never see worse than that in the next few months, my lad, you'll be lucky," she told him.

He was introducing notabilities to her, Diderot the biologist, the short cheerful Elkman, his other comrades—all with an air of combined pride and modesty which made Pat long for her mother to be there. Tom taking his small place in this group of famous men! Could this be the boy she had longed to nurse years ago when she was a child?

Janet introduced her to her father, a stout, sturdy figure who had a habit of putting his hands in his pockets, and swaying gently on his heels. He demanded, and took, as much limelight as possible.

My family is much nicer, thought Pat with satisfaction.

She had introduced Tom to Janet, then beyond them

she saw Kent Willerby. Mr. Westbrow seemed to monopolize him.

There were toasts to "our sponsors", to the representative of the Government, speeches and telegrams of good wishes, all very gay and light-hearted, but when Pat turned aside to see the display of photographs of the white land to which they were going, the map with the course marked out, the icebergs towering above a small ship which had made a previous voyage, she felt a thrill of anxiety, fascination and terror.

"What do you think of them?"

She started, to find Kent Willerby beside her.

"I can't help being frightened, yet I'd love to go too," she breathed. "When Tom and I played explorers years ago, I was always there as cabin boy."

His serious face changed as she spoke, and Pat knew an odd pleasant certainty that he enjoyed her words.

"Tom's a fine lad," he said. "Everyone says that we're lucky to have him."

He was showing her the route on the large map, the plans for heating the prefabricated huts, the photographs of the "weasel" vehicles which would transport them over the ice.

Pat listened as a woman would listen, translating technical words into pictures of men in action, in danger, surrounded by a great white waste, at the mercy of storm and accident.

"Suppose anyone is ill," she said.

"You don't trust me?" he asked her, and this time there was actually a twinkle in those deep blue eyes.

"It's what you've always wanted to do, isn't it?" she asked, gently.

"It is a chance in a lifetime," he said.

Men were like this, thought Pat with a pain at her heart. They made a dream, a fantastic, impossible dream, and then they could not rest until they achieved it. Their work, their home, their friends and loves, mattered nothing.

He was looking at her thoughtfully, almost as if he would paint the picture of her at this moment—the palest green of chiffon against the delicate skin, the brilliant hair drawn back from the eager face.

“Yes, of course, it is a chance in a lifetime,” she repeated.

She felt as if that strange glance of his were drawing some vitality out of her.

Turning to escape it, she saw approaching them a little lady with snow-white hair and an agitated, almost querulous expression.

“There you are, Kent. I don’t think I can stay any longer, and it isn’t really necessary, is it? It’s quite a nuisance coming up to town for this.”

“Mother, I don’t know whether you’ve met Miss Merriford. She’s Tom’s sister.”

“Merriford?” repeated Lady Willerby, in her vague way. “Oh, of course, that nice boy with the red hair. You’re his sister? How do you do?”

“Miss Merriford is at St. Antholin’s,” said Kent quietly.

His smile had gone, he had the quiet, restrained manner of one dealing with a fractious child.

The little lady smiled, but Pat felt that the information mattered not at all to her. Her eyes were on a diamond-studded watch on her wrist.

“I shall go, dear, even if you can’t come with me,” she said. “So pleased to have met you. Come, Kent.”

Kent Willerby turned back to Pat urgently.

"I'm going to see my mother off," he said. "But don't go yet. I shan't be long."

Pat was bewildered. She could not help a surge of excitement at his interest in her, at his delight in her company. For the first time, at least at a social gathering, they were meeting as equals, as friends. He could not know what this meant to her. She wandered along the photographic display while the crowd thinned.

"Ready?" Tom asked her brusquely.

"Not yet," she said gaily. "I needn't go just yet."

"Well, I'm going to turn in early," he said. "Busy day tomorrow. You never told me about that girl in pink, the little one. She says she works with you."

"Janet? Oh, yes, she's First Year."

Where was Kent Willerby? Why was he so long? Of course, he must look after his mother. Perhaps he had been only polite. No, she was certain that he had meant what he said about coming back.

"Well, do you mind if I push off?" asked Tom uncertainly. "The chaps are waiting for me."

"Oh, Tom, I shan't see you again," exclaimed Pat suddenly. "I may not be able to get along to the wharf in time."

"That's O.K.," said Tom, unmoved. "I hate people hanging about and waving, and all that. If you're going, go, that's my motto. Well, good-bye, old girl. Love to the folks."

That was a good deal for Tom to say, and Pat had never imagined that their farewell would be said here in the luxuriously furnished anteroom to the hall, where great baskets of spring flowers were reflected in the mirrors. Tom would not see the spring at home.

"Take care of yourself," she said as lightly as she could.

He kissed her briskly, and was off down the steps as blithely as if he were going to another party.

Pat hesitated. She ought to go back to the hospital.

Then Kent Willerby hurried in at the entrance, looking round anxiously.

He came straight to her, and her heart was full of delight.

She had waited. She had known that he would come back. And he had come.

"Good," he said. "My mother is always like this at the last moment. Have you got to get back to the hospital? I'm staying in town tonight. I'll drive you over if you like."

"Thank you," said Pat quietly.

But when she had collected her belongings and was in the car beside him, he did not talk. She watched him in the varying lights from the streets, she saw the shape of his head silhouetted against the moving traffic. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, which were quite impossible for her to speak aloud.

I don't want you to go. I know you won't rest until you do go, darling, but I shall hate to be without you. I want you to be safe and happy. Darling.

Ridiculous, absurd things to say to a man she hardly knew, who knew so little about her. Yet in the car she felt almost as if the words spoke themselves.

They were at the hospital far too soon, he was drawing the car up in the familiar Alley. The flagstones were wet, the scaffolding as dreary as ever, there was a sough of wind from the river not far away.

"Thank you—for giving me this lift," said Pat,

gathering up her little borrowed evening bag and the macintosh.

“Pat,” he said, then stopped.

She held her breath at the tone of his voice.

He leant towards her.

“To our next happy meeting,” he said deliberately, and his lips touched hers, not deeply, almost shyly, then he drew back.

He was out of the car, holding the door open for her before Pat had recovered herself. “

“Good-bye, good luck,” she said.

Then she was running in at the porter’s lodge, macintosh flapping over her arm, running so that he should not see the tears, tears of farewell, of excitement, of happiness in her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

THE next morning, Pat sacrificed her midday meal to rush to the bridge for the last glimpse of the little craft, the *Foxglove*, moving out on the first stage of her long journey south. The great arms of Tower Bridge opened to let her through. The usual motley London crowd were there on the bridge to watch the departure, the mysterious, anonymous crowd bandying comments.

"Better them than me," said a stout man behind Pat.

"Too much fuss about this nonsense," one woman said to another. "But I liked their pictures in the paper."

"Glad to get away from the old country--and their wives, I bet," observed a pessimist in a tweed cap.

"Like to look through my glasses, chum?" said a man beside Pat.

Pat was just in time to see a figure in dark blue, sweater reaching to the chin, on the deck. She recognized the lithe movement more than the actual figure of Kent Willerby. There, too, was Tom waving the light blue scarf she had knitted for him. He had remembered! She had said that she would try to look out for him, but now it was on the other figure that she concentrated the glasses.

The platform of the bridge closed down, the traffic resumed its interrupted journey, a policeman put in a

steady "Move along there now," as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

"Thank you for the glasses," said Pat to the man who had spoken to her.

"I know what they're going to," he said quietly, and she saw then that he was a cripple. "Leastways, it was the Arctic for me. But frost-bite gets you. I've never been the same man since. But that was convoys in a freezing winter."

His words seemed like a bad omen to Pat as she hurried back to the hospital, her cloak flying in the cold wind.

When would she see the two she loved again?

But there was little time for speculation. The wards were short-handed, there were more complicated studies, and she was handicapped by her junior, Janet Westbrow.

"The things that girl forgets," said Sister, who was usually good-tempered. "No. 10's diet mixed up with 18, mistake in dispensary notice, and she doesn't move trolleys fast enough."

Pat remembered her own light-hearted attempt at getting speed on to a trolley by putting her feet on the rung, and riding swiftly along the slope on the ground floor. She preferred to forget the aftermath, but she sympathized with her junior.

"You're a silly girl," she warned Janet briskly. "What did Sister say?"

"Scolded me, warned me, said she was used to nurses in love, but that shouldn't put me off my work. As if she'd know!"

"Sister Warrenden is very nice, and her fiancé died in a car accident," said Pat slowly, for the first time

resenting that attractive lightness in Janet. "Are you in love?"

Janet shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe. Oh, I thought I was. But it's no use anyway. What my father says goes."

Pat was surprised at the bitterness in her tone. The girl seemed capable of making two opposing statements, and believing each as she said it.

"I told you," said Ann calmly, when Pat discussed the problem over coffee. "She's the sort who wants her cake in her hand, and to enjoy eating it. She may have come here because of some love affair or because her father wanted it, but I bet she'd get out on some excuse if she felt like it. And I don't see why she should try to walk off with Lee the way she does."

Pat shook her head.

"Doesn't worry me," she said blithely. "At least, not really. I do like going out to lovely places with him. But Janet can have him."

"She only wants him because he is someone else's," said Ann, that small, firm chin stuck in the air in defence of a friend, as she would never have defended herself.

Pat went to do her special training in a country hospital in the north, missed St. Antholin's more than she could say, and returned thankfully to her old cubicle.

Lee met Pat with enthusiasm.

"Are you going to forgive me playing about with Janet? Doesn't mean a thing to her or to me. You were miles away," he pleaded.

"You're a free agent," Pat reminded him.

She thought that only her vanity was hurt.

She was looking out at the plane trees in the court-yard. They had been scarred and leafless when the *Foxglove* sailed. Now that the first leaves had appeared, with the seed-balls swinging airily on the fine stems, she thought how wonderful it would be when they were leafless again.

Lee passed his finals, and held a wild bachelor celebration party, during which the hero of the occasion, dancing a hornpipe on the kitchen table in his flat, slipped and sprained his ankle.

"All done on purpose," declared his friends. "Just to get himself into the ward where his red-head is on duty!"

Pat found him a trying patient, for he knew all the dodges, he seized every opportunity to call for her.

"You know you like going out with me, we laugh at the same things, and I—well, I adore that red hair of yours, and the way you chuckle, and those freckles on your nose. Come on, Pat, say yes. Maybe I'm not the romantic sort. After all, you did throw things at me soon after we met. But I—I do love you."

She knew that strong, square face so well, and for once the dark eyes were not mischievous, but pleading. He had caught her hand between his own two hands and was pressing it hard.

"I know, and I feel so unkind," said Pat. "But we've been through all this before, Lee. I—I don't want to get married. I don't feel that I want to leave the hospital. I'm quite happy here."

And her secret self said: Yes, until Kent Willerby returns.

"I can't make you out," he grumbled. "You're no ice maiden, you can be gay as a lark at our parties—

I've told my sister Nina about you, and she says she'd love to meet you—when she comes to England. Pat, think about it."

"Please don't ask me now," she said hurriedly. "I've spent far too much time with you. You're a bad patient, and you know it. There are people worse than you. Wait until later on, Lee."

His eyes brightened as if he found some encouragement in her words. He drew a writing-case towards him, fished out air-mail letter forms. Pat laughed.

"Your family have had more letters from you in these few days than they've had for years," she told him.

She was busy with the other patients in the ward, the male ballet dancer who made so much fuss about his food, who was visited by glamorous ballerinas, to the great delight of the other men; and a business man who boasted of his acquaintance with Jake Westbrow.

"I'd like to be here for the day when Westbrow has the new wing opened," he told her, wincing at the sting of his treatment.

"Another few weeks," Pat pointed out.

When his ankle recovered, Lee persuaded her to let him drive her home in his ancient car, which was all that his grandfather allowed him.

She liked the way he treated the chicken problem, when his people had run a business with thousands of chickens as a mere sideline to the rest of the sheep-farm. Mrs. Merriford approved him. Pat thought that he was in one way a substitute for Tom. The Captain had visited New Zealand on his voyages, and treated Lee as a young shipmate.

He shared the interest and excitement of Tom's letters, of hearing his voice on the radio from Lyttelton,

in New Zealand, the port of departure to the southern silence. Pat heard with mounting excitement the few phrases from Elkman and Diderot, then the quiet words from Kent Willerby.

Pat had to stand with her back to the others looking out at the buds on the lilac bushes when she heard his voice.

So little when she yearned for so much more.

Now preparations were going ahead for the opening of the new wing to be called after Westbrow, comprising the latest medical electrical equipment. As usual, there were delays at the last minute, men working overtime.

Since the building of this new wing cut off the angle of the older wards, the corridor provided a short cut for people in a hurry. It was supposed to be out of bounds, but if a nurse were told to bring equipment from one ward to another, it was a great convenience to run along the new sloping corridor.

Tomorrow everything would be in action, thought Pat. Old Edward Manthorpe, the founder of the hospital two centuries ago, would have been amazed at the varied lights, the panels of controls, the equipment which would have seemed magical to him. Pat wondered if the old man's spirit were prowling here in the dusk, as she stood at the end of the sloping corridor, remembering with guilty amusement, her ride—that forbidden pleasure—on the rail of a trolley.

The electricians had been working overtime to arrange the last details. Now they had gone off duty. She had seen them busy at the complicated fuse-box behind the glass panel.

Then she heard a strange sound, a sound of something heavy rolling in the deserted corridor. As she

stared, she saw rolling towards her one of the trolleys carrying the urns of hot soup and stew—rolling out of control! She stepped aside smartly only just in time, as the trolley swept neatly, on this slope designed especially for fast working, to her right, through the glass panel, and crashed into the panel of the fuse-box.

Heavens, this has torn it for tomorrow, thought Pat in dismay, as she identified the flying figure behind the trolley.

With the doors shut at each end, the electricians gone home, there was no one to be disturbed by the crash.

“Janet! Do you know what you’ve done!” she gasped. The small fair girl burst into tears.

“I wanted to get through quickly, I forgot about coming here,” she sobbed. “Oh, what will my father say!”

“I fused everything in this Wing, I bet,” groaned Pat. “And just now, before the opening!”

Janet’s face was pale and strained.

“I’m always in some scrape. It’s my father’s big day, he’s making one of his speeches, and I shall be the family fool. It’s the most terrible thing which has ever happened to me.”

She looked so small and unexpectedly forlorn that Pat, in spite of the cool dislike which had grown up in her, was sorry.

“Anyone know you came along here?” she asked. Janet shook her head.

“Who’d notice when there’s a rush on?”

Pat hesitated.

“You don’t know what it will be like with my father,” cried Janet, with an unusual passion. “You’ve never

had to toe the line as I have. Why, being in the hospital here is better any day. What will he say? I've made him look a fool, and there's nothing he hates like that. I could—I could—run away, drown myself——”

“Don't be silly,” said Pat, in her turn moved by Janet's unusual vehemence. “I tell you what. I'll say I did it.”

“What? You can't!” cried Janet.

Her small face brightened, then. She breathed: “Oh, Pat, would you?”

For a second, Pat regretted her impulsive nature. Something in the kitten-like face had stirred her to pity. Pat would have to stand the racket. She must run and explain, apologize, be reprimanded, look a fool. But after all, she said to herself, she had been through it before.

Pat regretted that impulse many times after she had rushed that evening to Matron. Telephones sprang into action, harried men returned to deal with the fault, crouching on the floor, sweating and grumbling at the damage.

“I should have thought you would have known better, Nurse Merriford,” said Matron coldly. “You have been foolish and irresponsible before, but now — And the unnecessary delay and expense.”

Pat thought she would have felt better if she had really committed the crime. Instead of attending the opening, with royalty and flowers, and the speech by Jake Westbrow, she was on extra duty.

Mr. Brown, Westbrow's acquaintance, now practically recovered, was allowed by special permission to attend the opening in his wheel chair.

“Jake was above himself,” he grunted. “Wife and

daughter there in style. The girl looked a bit pale, as if she were frightened of something. You're a fine one, red-head, putting the stuff out of action at the last minute. Can't have much faith in you after that darn silly mistake."

It was all round the hospital. Pat had to bear it, with angry regret.

One evening Janet came to Pat's cubicle when Pat was curled up in the window-seat, her books round her, her eyes on the plane trees. Her bookmark was a photograph cut from a magazine, not of the Antarctic group, but of Kent Willerby at his desk.

When the leaves dropped and the bark peeled off, the *Foxglove* would be returning.

"Hullo!" she said, when Janet came in.

"I came to tell you that I'm resigning," said Janet, standing just inside the door, putting her hands deep into the pockets of her white apron.

"Resigning?" exclaimed Pat. "Good Heavens, why?"

"I don't feel I can stand it. There's the winter to get through, and I shall go abroad."

"But your father! Why, if I'd known this, I needn't have taken on all that blame for you," cried Pat. "You are a changeable creature."

At her hasty movement, the books slid to the ground. Janet picked them up, the magazine cutting with them. Pat slipped it quickly into the *Nursing Manual*.

Janet looked at her miserably.

"I'm telling my father it's because of my health," she said. "It's all I can do. And I don't really like hearing people saying what a fool you were when it was my fault."

"Goodness, I've stood the racket so far," said Pat

more cheerfully than she felt. "I don't suppose it's done me much good but there—— You needn't bother about me, Janet."

In spite of her odd nature, the girl evidently had some compunction.

"But I must get away," cried Janet. "I won't stay on. My father will have to listen this time. I can't stand it."

Pat looked at her consideringly.

"I can see you've made up youi mind," she said. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you had some plan of your own, Janet. But good luck to you, anyway."

The nine days' sensation of Janet Westbrow's departure passed. And the winter she had pretended to dread was certainly something unpleasant that year.

Pat spent Christmas with the family. There were cousins of her father's who always visited them, and the Captain characteristically washed his hands of them, going for long walks along the sand-dunes.

But young Roger and Maria were fascinated by Tom's adventure, and listened breathlessly beside Pat as the radio messages came through from the Antarctic wastes—the cheerful words in voices thinned by distance and mechanism, but yet holding the essential quality of the beloved.

Tom's "Hullo, Mum!" had the shyness which was part of him. Diderot's broken English was almost humorous, then came Kent Willerby's clear, determined voice detailing adventures. Pat listened intently.

"They speack into the mike, then the records on tape are flown back, probably to New Zealand," said the scientific young Roger, "and they simply put them on the radio there and link them up."

"It sounded just like him," said Mrs. Merriford simply, turning aside to blink her eyelashes.

"It was him, Auntie. Coo, I wish I were there."

Such little satisfaction to read of their living arrangements, to know how the bunks were placed, how Tom and the carpenter had contrived an extending desk for papers, how the husky dogs howled at night, how they looked forward to the return of the penguins.

And now the time of return was crawling nearer. The plane trees were putting out the finest of tendrils.

Pat sighed and wrote up her log book, glad of the first bright light of spring. She had strings to her cap now, she had no difficulty in making them into the correct shape now. Under the practical surface of her training, of her adaptation to the hospital discipline, Pat's heart was singing.

The radio reported that the *Foxglove* was on her way from the Antarctic to Christchurch.

Soon, soon, he would be here.

"What do you think of that?" demanded Gail one day at supper in the dining-hall. "Of course it's her. I'd recognize that nice little smile and pussy-licked-the-cream expression. It's our Janet, who was too nervous to complete her training —I don't believe she ever meant to!—and there she is, large as life at the garden party at Christchurch, with all the heroes."

The other nurses crowded round the newspaper which Gail was displaying. Yes, there was Janet, airily dressed in a summer frock, standing in a terraced garden in a group. There was Tom, turned sideways, surely a little thinner and taller. And there was Kent Willerby, looking as serious as when he had examined a patient.

"Lucky creature," said Ann longingly. "She's had a summer when we have had a winter! What a thing it is to have a wealthy father!"

Pat was frankly envious. To have been there in Christchurch when the *Foxglove* arrived, to have been able to welcome the crew! Yes, Janet had timed her tiresome rebellion rightly.

There was an air-mail letter from Tom, posted in Christchurch on arrival.

"Wonderful time," he wrote. "To be entertained royally everywhere. Staying at a place called 'Duncans'."

When Pat told Lee the news, he grinned and said: "Trust our Nina. She's managed Grandfather this time. That's our place. I wish I were there now."

Pat borrowed his photographs of the house to show her mother. Tom would enjoy this luxury for a change.

"If only he could fly home," said Mrs. Merriford wistfully as she mixed her rich fruit cake, the kind Tom liked.

"No, the latest report says some of them will, but not Tom and one or two others," said Pat.

Her voice was more dull than usual. Kent Willerby, too, had elected to come home by sea. He would work on his reports.

She told herself that she had not expected any letter or message from him, but there had been a little wistful hope.

At last the wonderful day dawned. To Pat the whole world seemed exciting at the return of the *Foxglove*.

There was only one cloud on the welcome home, Mrs. Merriford was ill with influenza, her husband

would have to stay with her, so that Pat would be the only one to meet Tom.

In the special circumstances Matron had given Pat time off, and she was down at the wharf early, among the welcoming groups.

Pat started as a sunburnt man made his way through the crowd to her. It was Diderot, the French biologist who had been with the expedition.

"It is Miss Merrisord, is it not? Our Tom's sister? I met you at the farewell party. I was one of those who flew back, and now I am here to welcome them."

"How were they all?" she asked.

"Wonderful. We were well looked after. We all worked hard at our own jobs, but it was good. I cannot describe it. Nothing went wrong but a few storms here and there. No accidents. So lucky."

"And Dr. Willerby?" Pat's voice almost faltered.

"There is a fine man. I had thought he would have come back with us, but he said he would use the time on board to write his report. I thought he was very serious after we reached Christchurch—— Ah, I cannot say the name, but always, the people are so kind."

Through the lifted arms of Tower Bridge came the little ship, and sirens hooted, arms were waved. Pat could hear the voice of the broadcaster behind her speaking into the microphone from the top of the recording van. She was in such a daze of excitement, swung hither and thither in the moving crowd, that she hardly knew what she was doing. She could not see Tom in the group on deck, she must have missed him.

She could not see Kent Willerby, either, but Diderot was waving to others of the crew whom he recognized.

The craft drew in to the wharf, gangways were put down, officials and important personages were going aboard.

Pat felt a touch on her arm.

"You are Miss Merriford?"

The man was in reefer coat, some official of the Shipping Company, she supposed.

"Would you come aboard with me, please? Dr. Willerby wants to speak to you."

"To me?" exclaimed Pat, then she followed the man through the crowd to a gangway.

She was so mystified that she hardly noticed the groups on deck, the piles of packing-cases, the excited voices, the bronzed men surrounded by friends and relatives.

She was going down a companion-way and was being shown into a cabin full to bursting point with luggage, specimen cases, equipment of all types, cans, of film.

A faint sense of fear came to Pat. The contrast of this confined space with the joy, the acclamations, the rush and bustle outside, the sight of embraces, of meetings, of congratulations was too sudden, too sinister.

Kent Willerby turned from a large trunk which he was using as a desk.

"I have to tell you this myself. There was—there has just been—an accident."

"Tom?" she asked, her thoughts flying to her mother and father at home, waiting for the voice on the telephone.

"Yes," he put out his hand, held hers firmly, but she was not conscious of anything but fear.

His face had changed, she thought. He looks so sad, so serious.

"Tom? He's—he's not dead?"

"No. But he's been badly hurt. And it's my fault."

"But why didn't they tell us? There was no news of it on the radio this morning," Pat burst out indignantly. "Where is he? I must see him."

"You shall. He's very badly hurt, Pat. It was only this morning. Everything was packed up. It was my fault. I picked up a case of my instruments—heavy ones. It was my damned carelessness, all in a moment. Tom was there at the door. I fell against him, with the case, on him. He hit the bulkhead. My God, I shall never forget it."

"Oh, no," whispered Pat. "His spine?"

"Yes, paralysis, temporary, we hope. We radioed at once to St. Antholin's, the ambulance will be here now. He's unconscious, of course. I'll do all that's possible."

"Then he may—not be able to walk again—ever," said Pat.

All those nightmares of her first year's training came back to her.

That was when old Cunningham, who was reported to have been part of St. Antholin's when it was first built, calm, gaunt, grey-haired, imperturbable, had said to her with her cool, dry manner: "Not too much imagination, nurse. Your job is to help, not hinder. Calm, my girl."

That astringent quality had been like a reviving douche of cold water.

She tried to be nurse and not sister, and said: "What can I do?"

"Good girl," he answered, and now she had time to appreciate his own ordeal.

He was holding her hands, both of them, and looking at her strangely, almost as if he had never seen her before.

Life was flowing back to her through those vital hands. She could hear voices, hearty, laughing voices, the popping of corks, the hooting of ships' sirens, the murmur of the crowd on the river-bank. She was conscious most of all of the personality of this man beside her.

He had returned, but he was not the man of whom she had dreamed.

He was sun-bronzed, so that his eyes looked bluer than ever. But he was miles away from her, she felt the shock of his withdrawal.

"I must go to him," she said.

"You can't do anything at the moment."

She nodded.

"I know, but—"

"Can you ever forgive me, Pat?"

It was as if they had both leaped a great gulf now. His eyes, those deep-set dark blue eyes were pleading, there was a light in them she had never seen before. She knew that he was deeply moved, she realized that he was suffering intensely, and the love she felt for him grew suddenly from a young girl's emotion to the tenderness of a woman. It was if a bud had suddenly opened into a flower, a flower of strong sweetness.

He was suffering too.

She did not speak, for she could not, and while he was still holding her hands, the door was suddenly flung open, and a girl's voice cried gaily: "Kent, darling, where have you hidden yourself? No one knew where you were, and Daddy wants to see you. There's

a crowd of reporters—— Oh! Good gracious, it's Pat Merriford."

Pat turned in bewilderment.

"I was just telling Pat—the news—about her brother, Janet," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, isn't it too sad? But I expect it will be all right. Come along, dear. There are lots of people I want you to see. And you might look a bit more pleased to see a fiancée who's flown all the way from New Zealand to be ready to welcome you home! Don't you think so, Pat?"

CHAPTER FOUR

His fiancée! Janet Westbrow was his fiancée. “Don’t look so surprised,” said the small, fair girl with a trill of laughter. “It was all very sudden and secret in Christchurch, wasn’t it, darling? Only waiting for your return to make the announcement. Well, aren’t you going to congratulate us, Pat?”

“Oh, yes—yes, of course,” said the girl hurriedly. “Only, in the circumstances, with Tom, I’m rather—upset.”

“I’ll come with you, Pat,” said Kent Willerby quietly. He had recovered himself, he was no longer the deeply-moved man who had held her hands, who had not spared himself, who had indeed in those few tense moments given her part of himself.

She wanted to escape from him, she was glad to go through the door into the gangway, then up to the crowded deck. The stretcher-bearers were there, and on the stretcher lay a still blanket-wrapped figure. She saw Tom’s dear brown head, his closed eyes.

Tears rose in Pat’s throat, but she fought them back.

“I’m coming with you,” Kent Willerby said.

There were other people who spoke to her, she had no recollection of what they said. Then Kent was beside her, quietly in charge. She was in the ambulance with the attendant from St. Antholin’s.

Routine asserted itself. The still figure was taken straight to a bed, but not in the ward to which Pat was allotted. She must hold herself in patience, a frightful, tearing patience.

First she must telephone home. Matron asked her into her own room.

"You don't want to use the hall call-box for this talk," she said kindly. "Dr. Willerby suggested it. It will be best for you to get the news through yourself before the radio and the papers take it up."

"Thank you, Matron," Pat said mechanically.

The operator had got the number. The telephone was ringing at the other end, ringing and ringing.

Her mother would be in bed, Pat knew, probably agitated because her father was not answering it. She could see home so clearly, her mother dragging herself across the bedroom to call out of the window: "Gray, Gray, telephone." Then her father would come charging in at the kitchen door, forgetting to kick off his dirty Wellington boots on the way.

There was a roar at the other end. "Is that you, Tom, my boy?"

"Dad, it's me. Pat. Listen to me."

"What's the matter? Is Tom there? What's happened? Pat, get off the line. Tom will want to speak to us. Is he there with you? If I hadn't been landed with these darned chickens—what did you say?"

"Daddy, listen," Pat shrieked at him. "There's been an accident. Tom has been taken straight to hospital, and we're waiting to hear now. You mustn't worry."

How often she had said those words to anxious inquirers! And how useless was that advice, she knew now, better than ever.

"There was an accident. Dr. Willerby is going to tell you all about it. It's—it's—Tom's back, his spine. They don't know it all yet. There must be an examination and—"

There was a sudden silence at the end of the telephone, a silence worse than the Captain's loudest explosion.

"I wanted you to know before you saw the papers."

"What the dickens has happened? You're talking just like a nurse. Mustn't worry! What's the good of that to your mother and me? I'm coming up at once."

"Daddy, darling, it's no good, not at the moment. He won't be conscious for a little while. If you'll only—"

There was a slight commotion at the other end of the telephone, then her mother's voice spoke calmly.

"Be quiet, Gray. I will not go back to bed until I know."

Pat heaved a sigh of relief. Her mother was in command, and the raging and roaring of the Captain would subside in the usual way. She repeated the story.

"You know I'll telephone you as soon as there's any more news. It was an accident. I don't know all the details myself yet. Dr. Willerby—"

Her father was obviously listening at the same time, for she heard a typical mutter, and: "He's responsible? Horse-whip him, if any good. What's that? All right, my dear. You carry on."

Pat spared a moment to wonder how in the world a woman like her mother could have married a man like her father, but even more how she could put up with him.

Then she heard the calm voice again.

"Gray, you've left the garden door open. The chickens — Please go and cope with them. Yes, of course I'll tell you everything."

"Mother, darling, how are you? Oughtn't you to be back in bed? I'll come down as soon as I can, even if it's only for an hour or two."

"You know what your father is," her mother said quietly. "Tell me, Pat, it—isn't hopeless?"

Again Pat caught her breath. Here was a courage, all the stronger for being quiet. Accepting a bitter truth, dealing with it without protest, enduring.

At that moment Pat loved her mother as she had never loved her before.

Quiet strength, that's what *I* need, she thought passionately.

"They don't know—we can't know yet. I'll phone, or come as soon as I can."

"Of course, Pat, dear, we can always rely on you."

The tone made Pat glow, for not often did her mother give praise or commendation.

"Go back to bed. Is your head better? Is Daddy any help?"

There was a slight laugh at the other end.

"At the moment he's ordering the chickens off the quarter-deck in naval language. Good-bye, dear. This must be an expensive call."

"It's from Matron's office, she's good."

"And give our love to Tom," breathed her mother.

Pat wiped a quick tear from one eye and turned to thank Matron, who was speaking quietly at that moment with Kent Willerby.

Remembering those dear people at home, the

restrained agony of her mother, the roaring protests of her father which she knew covered so much concern, she could almost have hated Kent at that moment.

Perhaps he saw something of that emotion in her face, for he hesitated. It was as if beneath that armour of his profession she felt deep hurt.

"I have told my people," she said quietly.

It was as if the experience had changed them both, taming Pat's usual exuberance. Then her training asserted itself. Both were in their armour again.

Matron's glance dismissed Pat kindly. She went into the familiar corridor. She looked at the clock, compared it with her watch, and could not believe that so short a time had elapsed since she had set out so gaily that morning to greet Tom.

She went up to her room, but the home photographs on the walls reproached her. There was another emotion fighting its way up in her consciousness.

Janet Westbrow was engaged to marry Kent Wilerby.

She had no right to feel jealous, no right to feel aggrieved, except at her own foolishness. That kiss at the end of the party had been a gay leave-taking, nothing more. She had built on this slight foundation a wonderful dream. Awakening was bitter.

If her knowledge were correct, Tom's spine might be hurt irretrievably, he might be paralysed from the legs downward and never walk again.

Tom, the walker, the cyclist, the climber, the sportsman, condemned to the torture of inaction.

That was defeatist thinking, never to be indulged in by a nurse.

She would go to the dining-room. But as Pat entered, she saw that Janet Westbrow, in her smart grey travelling suit, was the complacent centre of interest.

"Bad luck about Tom," whispered Ann, squeezing the girl's hand.

"I'm waiting to hear," Pat said as calmly as she could.

"And what do you think of all that? Pussy has licked the cream, hasn't she? Always said she'd get what she wanted, she must have marked him down here and followed him round."

The buzz of questions broke into intelligible questions.

"Janet, you dark horse, you never gave an inkling. When he left here, Dr. Willerby hardly knew you!"

"Do go on, tell us how it all happened."

"Well, you see, after I was ill and left the hospital——"

"You wanted to get out," said Ruth Bowman, a big north-country girl noted for her blunt speech.

"I was ill, and my father thought a sea voyage would do me good. So I went with him. He had some business in New Zealand. And, of course, when we were there the expedition was just due back, and everyone made a great fuss of them. There were receptions and parties, and, of course, Kent remembered me from St. Antholin's, and—there you are."

Pat linked her arm in Ann's. Janet moved towards them.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am about that accident to your brother, Pat. It was such an odd thing to happen, for Kent is always so careful. I know he's most concerned, for he's so conscientious."

The words, in that faint drawling accent, were infuriating to Pat in her present mood.

"Words won't make him better," she said, and then could have bitten out her tongue, for she feared that what she said would go back to Kent Willerby.

She felt as if her skin were raw, and that someone was drawing a rough hand over it. There was Tom with his unnecessary suffering, the possible ruin of his life, and this girl for whom she had once taken unfair blame was gloating over her success in capturing Kent Willerby.

"I must go," said Janet quickly to cover the slight, and the younger nurses moved with her to the door. "I have to wait for Kent."

Ruth Bowman was following Pat and Ann.

"There's something about that madam that always riles me," she said slowly. "Top dog she must be, or she'll know the reason why. And what a ~~fine~~ chap like Kent Willerby can see in her I don't know. Unless he thinks her father can help him along."

Pat swung round on her.

"Don't you dare say such a thing about Dr. Willerby," she said angrily. "He's not that sort."

Her friends stared at her.

"Sorry. I'm touchy about everything," she muttered.

"I know." Ruth nodded and went to the service hatch ahead of them.

"All the same, Pat, I wouldn't be surprised if that were in Kent Willerby's mind," Ann continued with an air of gentle reproof. "I've never thought he was quite human myself with all this insistence on research in Antarctic, and with his family history, so probably Janet, being Westbrow's daughter, fits in quite well."

Pat felt as if she had sunk into a deep pit of unhappiness. There was no light anywhere.

She was on duty in her ward when the call which she had been dreading came for her.

“Nurse Merriford to go to Matron.”

Pat trembled, as she waited to straighten her cap, to crisp her apron.

She tapped at the door, went in. Was it only an hour ago that she had been here telephoning her family?

Matron looked up composedly from her desk.

“Dr. Willerby has sent a message that you can see your brother. Sir Hubert has examined him this afternoon. I’ve asked Ward Sister to release you while you go to your brother.”

“Thank you,” whispered Pat.

In her confusion she took the wrong turning in the maze of corridors. It was just what she would do, thought Pat angrily, but as she turned back from the laboratory wing, Lee Gauntley came out of the door behind her.

“Pat. Pat, darling,” he said, catching her arm. “I’ve just heard the news when I got back. I was tied up. Anything I can do?”

“Oh, Lee,” she said, clinging to him, as she would have clung to any human being in that cold fog of misery.

“Mustn’t give up,” he said sturdily. “Mustn’t let your brother see you like this. What’s the good of being a nurse if you can’t put on an act for him?”

They were at the end of the corridor. This modern wing was all glass. Any one at the other end would have a full view of their meeting, of Pat clinging to the young New Zealander’s arm, of his glance down at her.

"Thanks, Lec, you've done me good."

"Any time you want any more treatment——" he said.

That moment had helped her. It was true, she had to act hopefully for Tom's sake.

She went through the glass door, and was surprised that Kent Willerby was waiting for her outside the ward.

Again she had a quick perception of a change in his mood, as if he had withdrawn from her, was almost angry with her.

"I--I'm not late, I came as soon as I could," said Pat.

"He's recovered consciousness, he's very weak, but he naturally wants to see you."

He went with her into the ward. There was a screen round the bed, and she stepped beyond it with a feeling that all this was unreal. Tom should not be here, he should be out in fresh air, walking, talking, he should be at home.

She saw the white bed, then the brown face on the pillow, the grey eyes looking for her, the eyes so like her mother's.

"Tom, dear," she said. "This is bad luck," and smiled down at him. "Of all the things to happen after all you went through, just when you were home! Mum and Dad sent their love. In one way, I'm glad Mum wasn't here."

Her brother was clutching her hand.

"Are they all right? How long have I got to be here? It's so queer to feel no movement in my legs, Pat."

His face had sharpened.

"Do you remember that time when you were ill at

home, and I nursed you? And how you grumbled. Men are always bad patients. The doctors can't tell yet all the injuries in your fall, but if you stay quiet and rest, it will be easier."

His eyes pleaded, while she was talking all the cheerful, sentimental stuff that nurses and relatives must talk, and she knew his fear.

"There is—danger?" he whispered, clutching at her hand.

"Of course," she said in as matter-of-fact a way as she could. "But you went in search of adventure to the South Pole, and now you're having it in hospital."

"Am I going to—"

"Of course not," snapped Pat. "Really, you remind me of Dad when he had his bronchitis. There are pictures to be taken of the damage, then it won't be long before we get you staggering round the ward, but it's patience first, for a while."

"I can't feel below the waist. I thought I'd lost my legs. Pat, you'd tell me the truth?"

"Great big silly," scoffed Pat. "Of course you can't feel after an accident like that. It will all come back, don't worry, Tom."

The hand was slackening its grasp.

She sighed. He was slipping away into unconsciousness.

She laid the hand gently on the coverlet, turned away, her eyes bright with the tears which she would not shed.

She felt an arm across her shoulder as she passed beyond the screen, saw the Ward Nurse go in to her patient.

"Good girl," said Dr. Willerby's quiet voice.

He was walking with her to the corridor, closing the door behind her.

"He says he can't feel," said Pat anxiously.

That arm across her shoulder had given her, even in her fear, a sense of warm confidence, as if it were the arm of someone who cared for her trouble.

"There may be complications—shock to the nerves of the spinal cord. There'll be another opinion. What about your people?"

"My mother is ill with influenza, and my father can't leave her," said Pat.

He was thoughtful, standing now with his hands in the pockets of the white coat into which he had changed, staring out at the branches of the plane trees, with their young green leaves.

Pat had longed to see them like this, and now she hated them.

"Where did you say you lived?"

"My home is at Blythe, on the coast."

"This is Friday. I was to spend the week-end at my mother's place at Davant. If I drive down there this evening, can I give you a lift? You see, I must tell your people about the accident, explain how it happened. I'm responsible."

Pat could have put her arms round him then for that thought, for the sincerity of his voice. She might hate him for what he had done, in one mood, but she recognized that he was suffering, too.

"I'll have a word with Matron about it." He was dismissing her.

"It's very—thoughtful, very kind of you," she stammered. "As a matter of fact, it was my turn for week-end leave because of my brother coming home."

He nodded brusquely.

"Good. I'll let you know."

Only when she was flying back to her ward did Pat remember Janet Westbrow. Kent Willerby had not said a word about his own affairs, was he putting them aside for what he thought was his duty, his responsibility?

She went on with her duties soberly, dealt with her reports, soothed the male ballet dancer's vanity as she checked his temperature chart, telephoned the Almoner about the anxieties of a retired elderly Colonel, and was drawing breath when the telephone call came for her.

"I'm sure you appreciate that these are exceptional circumstances, Nurse Merriford," Matron said quietly. "But as you had this leave due to you, and as your parents must be very concerned about getting the latest news, you can take the leave as previously arranged, returning on Sunday evening."

Pat agreed. In her own room she changed hurriedly from her uniform into a nut-brown tweed suit. At the last moment she thrust a scarf into her pocket, and she was glad when she saw Dr. Willerby's open car.

How the other girls would envy her this opportunity. And it had come to her because of Tom's tragedy.

Dreams do come true, but the wrong way round, she thought.

Kent Willerby was brusque and abstracted. This could be no pleasant outing for him.

And what could he have arranged about his fiancée, Janet? He had said that he was going to his mother's home, he had not spoken of it as if it were his. Surely Janet would have wanted him with her!

"I'm afraid this has altered your plans," Pat began timidly.

"Yes, they had to be changed," he said with bluntness.

He was wishing that Janet was here, no doubt.

Pat clasped her hands tightly as the car swept into the main road leading south.

How strange that a man so conscientious should choose a girl who, to her own knowledge, was irresponsible! But he loved her, that was enough.

Yet, on that evening, with the swift movement, with the sense of being in the traffic and yet not of it, with watching those firm hands at the wheel, Pat's mood began to lift slightly from the strain of the day.

Unconsciously, she relaxed in her seat.

"You must find this so strange and different from the last year," she said. "Tom's letters and the radio made me see it all, but I suppose no one can imagine it really—the cold and the silence. It was what you always wanted, wasn't it? Are you satisfied with your work?"

He nodded. He too had relaxed in his seat, his eyes on the road, calm and easy the driver in command.

"It was my dream," he said. "As it was my father's before me. And he was defeated by it. As I was."

"But you made your researches—Tom said there was your report. You were working on it on the way back. It would help other expeditions in the future—even ordinary people—to live through every kind of strain and difficulty—Tom said so. Oh, Tom!"

"That's been the problem of every generation, hasn't it?" he asked soberly. "There the air was so clean, so pure, we lived in a community which depended each on the other." They were on a dual carriage-way now, running smoothly through the suburbs.

He began to talk, filling in details of what Tom had

mentioned in his letters, so that she could ask questions about the lighting system, the rations, the time the aeroplane crashed on the pack ice, the adventures of the husky dogs. It was as if in eager spirit she had been there, partly because of Tom, partly because of Kent himself.

Now they were in the country with the vista of meadows, of the soft roll of the Downs, the cloud masses building up to the south-west.

"I'm afraid this will make you late for going on to your mother's home," Pat said.

"I telephoned," he said, "and it won't make all that difference."

His mother had not come to welcome him home, Pat remembered.

"Oh!" said Pat blankly.

He turned to smile at her, and his shoulder in the tweed coat brushed against hers.

"Do you know, you have the most expressive voice—and eyes?" he said. "You sounded almost shocked then. I've heard you talk about your people. Tom used to talk about you all, and I envied him."

"Envy?" gasped Pat. "You, to envy anyone!"

He drove on in silence for a time.

"If one lives in a house, not a home, where one's parents who married with passionate haste are regretting it, one's point of view is different. My father escaped in his own way—to the Antarctic. That was his life. I made up my mind not to make his mistake, never to trust to a passionate, passing emotion."

"I see," breathed Pat very softly.

A lonely boy, emotionally starved at the most critical time of his life, the deserted father, the un-

known, but apparently resentful mother, the distrust of that happy family emotion which was, she realized now, a valuable possession in the life of herself and Tom. Almost a distrust of the happiness to be found in love.

She needed time to adjust this new impression of the clever Kent Willerby. He had put himself into his work, lost in that his capacity for emotion. How had that distrust been won over by a girl like Janet?

She remembered that ugly hint from Ruth Bowman that he was ambitious, and that Janet's father could help him. She did not reject that now, she held it in abeyance, trying to understand.

But she felt a glimmering doubt. Could a man who talked like this really love Janet? Could he know what loving meant?

And it was not for her to tell him, to show him, for loving stretched away into the distance. It was caring, with infinite patience, and with humour, it was the fabric which knit her differing parents together, it was indescribable and indestructible.

"We turn right here," said Pat. "Here's the sea."

The evening had turned chilly. A wind was blowing through the coarse grass, there was a sting in the air.

"Turn again by the 'Dog and Duck', then over this bridge across the marsh, and there we are," said Pat.

She had never come home without a confidence of warmth and welcome, but for the first time she saw the house with other eyes.

The paint needed renewing on the doors and window-frames, the garden was untidy.

"It will be all right to leave the car here," she said.

She opened the door and called as gaily as she could: "Anyone at home?"

There was a smell of wood-smoke, of baking scones. Her mother appeared at the kitchen door with surprise.

"Pat! We didn't expect you after your call this morning. And the radio—— What is the news?"

"I've brought Dr. Kent Willerby to see you. He's looking after Tom. He wants to talk to you and father."

"Do come in," said Mrs. Merriford quietly.

She moved slowly, but she had made the effort to get dressed in her warm old red frock. It was she who had lighted a fire, prepared supper.

"You'd better go and find your father," she said.

Pat went out into the dusk, and there loomed before her the tall figure with the basket of eggs.

"Hullo, Pat, my girl, where did you spring from?"

He was more subdued than usual. Pat clung to his arm. Together they put the eggs into their dated boxes, the first job to be done, then her father washed his hands at the scullery tap.

"What's he come for?" he demanded.

"He asked to meet you," said Pat simply. "The accident—you see, he feels it was his fault."

"Darned idiot," groaned her father.

They entered the living-room where Mrs. Merriford had switched on the lamp.

Kent Willerby was sitting in the small carved arm-chair on the farther side of the hearth. He had been leaning forward with his hands clasped together, like a prisoner before a judge, thought Pat quickly.

Mrs. Merriford did not look like a judge. Her hands rested lightly, but with an effort of control on the arms of the high chair which she liked, and Pat sensed the restraint in her attitude. Yet she was speaking composedly.

"Yes, I do understand how it happened," she was saying quietly.

In the light of the lamp Kent Willerby looked wretched, and Pat could have cried out at his suffering. On one side she hated anyone who would inflict this ordeal on her mother. But after that talk with Kent in the car she realized that the cold armour he had always worn was the result of his own environment.

"Now what's all this?" said Captain Merriford, blustering, Pat knew, to conceal his emotion. "What have you done, sir?"

"Dr. Willerby has been telling me," said Mrs. Merriford. "It was very good of him to come immediately, I am sure at some trouble to himself, to—to tell us about Tom."

"After you've smashed him up nicely, from what I've heard," said her husband savagely.

"You can't blame Dr. Willerby for an accident which might have happened to anyone," said Pat.

Her mother gave her a glance of warning. The Merriford temper, like the Merriford hair, was alike in each of them.

"Accident! Criminal carelessness," snapped her father.

"Now be reasonable, Dad," began Pat.

Her mother sighed. That one word of "reasonable" was liable to send her husband off into full spate. This occasion was one.

"Reasonable! A young man cut off in his prime, condemned to be an invalid all the rest of his life, just because of a fool. What do you expect me to say, sir?"

He glared at Kent Willerby, and Pat was aghast at

the explosion, accustomed as she was to her father's temper.

"At least Dr. Willerby came here to explain, to tell you the chances——"

"I'd like to speak for myself," said Kent Willerby coldly.

He was standing up now, and he seemed taller than before.

"I quite understand how you feel, Captain Merriford. There is nothing I can add to my apologies. But we have had a most careful examination today, and shall watch him. There are tests to be made. You will be kept informed."

He was distant, retreating into his experience, his professional discretion. Pat was distraught, there was nothing she could do.

"When can I see him? My husband and I cannot get away together," said Mrs. Merriford.

"I will let you know as soon as possible."

He was moving towards the door.

"But you haven't had any coffee, and after your journey, and all because of us! Please let me make you some coffee," pleaded Pat.

It was not like her father to be inhospitable, usually he delighted to offer his favourite sherry, but he stood there, hands in the pockets of his old tweed jacket.

"Thank you, no. I won't wait," said Kent Willerby, "but you can rest assured, Mrs Merriford, that your son is having the best attention. And there is always hope."

He had taken her hand, and it seemed as if something passed between them, some concern, some hint of understanding.

"There is always hope," repeated Mrs. Merriford.

Kent Willerby looked round the room, at the large, old-fashioned settee, the untidy book-case, the desk in the corner with the high-backed chair. There were photographs on the walls, photographs of two children in a swing, of a small boy poised on a diving-board, a grave-faced Tom with the unnatural spruceness of a schoolboy having his photograph taken.

Tom, the very room breathed of his threatened young life. No wonder the thought of him maddened her father, reproached Kent.

"Dr. Willerby talked of Tom on the expedition," she said quickly. "There's so much to hear about it all, and Tom—he can't tell us much yet."

"Do I want to hear it from Dr. Willerby?" snorted her father.

"Good night," said Kent quietly.

It was a wonder that he was taking her father's behaviour so quietly, Pat thought. When she remembered he had given up an engagement with his new fiancée, when he had had no respite since his exciting arrival this morning, when he had taken the trouble to drive half across the county to see her parents, she felt that she had not expressed her gratefulness.

She went with him to the door.

"I am so sorry, so dreadfully sorry," she began, but he interrupted her with: "Don't worry, Pat. I understand how your father feels. And I was interested to see your home. Tom talked so much about you all that I felt I recognized it all when I came."

Pat was astonished. During those long dark months of the Antarctic winter, no doubt the men had talked in the intervals of their work. Even the quiet Tom,

dear Tom—she could see him so clearly before her, with that raised eyebrow, that slow smile—must have given himself away.

Kent had taken her hand, pressed it firmly.

"You'll be needed," he said. "Here, and with Tom. And I shall need you to help me with him."

He was gone down the path. He had left the car lights on, in a moment he was on the move.

"Don't stand there, you'll get cold, Pat," he called.

The car swept away. Pat stayed there for a few seconds, regardless of the cold air blowing in from the sea.

She had said she would put Kent Willerby out of her thoughts, but today his conflicting behaviour only pressed on her more than ever. He was engaged to marry Janet Westbrow, yet he had left her for this call on the Merrifords. It was his duty, of course, yet he had talked to her with such intimacy that she felt as if she were admitted to his confidence. He had given no impression of the lover returned and anxious to be with his beloved, he had said that his homecoming with his mother would be very different from the one Tom would have had.

Pat looked at the vanishing car lights. With all her anxiety about Tom, about her family, she felt as if, with Kent Willerby's departure, some light was gone from her life.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT was a busy week-end for Pat. She insisted on her mother going back to bed, she carried out the household tasks to the accompaniment of her father's laments.

It was when she came to Tom's rooms that Pat's tears overflowed. All the cherished things were there. His old slippers had been put out, his dressing-gown hung on the door.

Pat banged the door behind her. She would not let herself think that Tom might not come back to this room.

On Sunday she persuaded her father to go to church to be out of the way while she cooked the dinner, made pastry and a cake to last the week. Her father enjoyed the sound of his voice in the hymns, he would probably disagree with the Vicar's sermon, but then he would not be brooding.

Her mother got up about eleven and sat with Pat in the kitchen.

Gypsy's latest batch of kittens had reached the stage of crawling out of their box. They were alternately cuffed by their mother, or washed and pushed back.

"I should beat that mixture a little more," said Mrs. Merriford valiantly. "Of course, doctors do such marvellous things nowadays."

"Yes, and they can never tell beforehand," Pat interrupted eagerly. "So much depends on the patient, and

will-power. You can't say Tom hasn't got any of that! I'm really longing to get back to St. Antholin's this afternoon to hear more."

"It would be nice if you were to be his nurse," said her mother wistfully.

"Not on your life. If I'd been in that ward already, maybe, but I'm not. Still, I'll be able to see him at visiting hours."

"Can you take him anything? Eggs, cake, he was so fond of my cherry cake," said her mother wistfully.

"I'll take some back," said Pat immediately. "But I'd like some myself."

Sunday dinner was successful, her parents said. Then there was only time to pack her case and the parcel for Tom, and be driven off by her father in the old car to the station.

Pat wished that her mother's shoulders did not droop. She had never thought of her parents as of any particular age, but for the first time there was a warning hint in her mother's posture.

"Wish I could drive you all the way," grunted her father. "If it weren't for this darned taxation and the price of petrol, and your mother—well, I would. See for myself. Don't trust that Willerby fellow."

Pat was silent.

"Tom could sue him for this," her father went on. "I was speaking to old Linimers after church this morning, you know, retired solicitor."

"Oh, no," protested Pat. "And you must wait, Dad, until we know. It's going to be a long and tricky thing, and you mustn't worry Tom about it. You've got to be hopeful when you come and see him."

"Hopeful," snorted her father.

"And you've got to keep an eye on mother," went on Pat.

Her father was silent, as if she had presented him with a new and unpleasant thought.

"I sometimes think there was a lot to be said for keeping daughters at home," he said, in an unusually quiet voice as he carried her parcel up to the little platform. "It's not fashionable or possible nowadays. And anyway you're tied up with that hospital of yours."

The little local train came in.

She dropped a kiss on his weather-beaten cheek as she leant out of the window.

She was glad to be back at the hospital. Lee rang her up. He would not be on duty that night, but he would see her soon.

"Imagine Kent Willerby falling for the white kitten," he remarked.

She was glad that it was a busy night.

When would she hear about Tom?

Early in the morning she was busy at the sterilizer when Lee came in.

"You look as white as a ghost," he told her. "Any cocoa going? You look as if you could do with a gallon. Sorry about your brother, Pat. But Kent Willerby will do his best."

He had put his arm round her, and the mere human contact was so soothing after that night of anxiety that Pat was glad to lean against him, to relax her guard, to realize how tired she was. If her head was on his shoulder, her bright red, unmistakable hair on his white coat.

"I do feel so despondent," she murmured.

"Nonsense, Kent Willerby will do his best," he repeated.

"After doing his worst," said Pat sharply. The door behind them swung open. Dr. Willerby was there.

"I thought you'd like to know about your brother. The nerves of the one leg are not irreparably damaged. He has considerable pain. Sister will call you when you can see him, some time tomorrow."

He had gone, his face still strained and tense. Pat stared after him in amazement. Kent Willerby had taken unusual and unofficial trouble to let her know the latest news of Tom.

Had he heard those unfortunate bitter words of hers? They were not the truth, they were one part of her mood, compound of her fatigue, her anxiety and, she had to admit it, resentment about Janet.

"Oh, I do hate myself," she burst out. "I didn't know that he'd be back at the hospital tonight. He was going into the country for the week-end."

She remembered the very different Kent Willerby who had sat opposite her mother beside the fire, the intimate atmosphere as they drove, the new understanding of him of which he had been conscious.

Janet Westbrow had not come into that.

"Yeah, so did someone else," said Lee. "What about some cocoa? His girl friend, the blonde Janet. Rang up in a fair tear, she did. Our little Horseradish was on the line. Had to explain that he was called away by an emergency. Our kitten has claws."

"But he must have told her, I mean, he came down with me to see my people, to tell them about Tom," Pat said in surprise.

Lee whistled.

"Better him than me. I bet it was worse than any of

his Antarctic experiences. And there was a broadcasting man on to him to give a talk, do something on TV about it."

"Any girl would be annoyed," she said slowly.

"Nonsense, if a chap's in this line he's got to be on tap, if he's conscientious. And he's worried to death about Tom, I bet. Besides, he's always had a soft corner for you."

"I don't believe that," gasped Pat.

A few months ago, how those words would have thrilled her!

But he was going to marry Janet.

The next day Sister telephoned she could go up to Tom's ward. And there, in the white bed, with the cradle to raise the bed-clothes above his limbs, was Tom, sunburnt little lines of anxiety round his grey eyes.

"This is a fine set out," he said. "Darn silly thing to have happened, and just now, too. How's Mum?"

"They were coming to see you, but Mum had influenza," said Pat, taking his hand.

It was brown and firm. The clasp of it gave her confidence.

"Dad went off the deep end, of course. Wanted to come up and fight everyone. You know him."

"Good old Dad," Tom grinned feebly, winced at an involuntary movement. "What are they going to do with me, Pat?"

"They have to find out, wait, examine, then you'll have what they call passive exercise, I expect, to bring back the power. All the girls are balloting to see who's to take you on. You're quite a hero, you know. You might have Ann. She's on the physiotherapy side."

"I feel a fool here," he grunted, looking with disfavour around him. "When can I go home?"

Pat felt a tightness round her heart. How often she had answered that question lightly, firmly, but without the strain which was with her now!

"When your legs are better," she said. "You've had a frightful shock, Tom. It's bound to take time."

The change in his face scared her.

"You mean I've got to hang about here for days, for weeks—maybe—?"

"Oh, do be sensible," snapped Pat, and at her familiar sisterly tone she saw the fear in his eyes diminish. "Be your age, Tom. How the dickens can they tell straight off at once? Things like spines, and the lumbar bit of you, and nerves too, can't be played with. And if you start worrying, you won't be so well."

"Any beer for me to celebrate?" he asked her, and she was reassured by the jauntiness of his tone. "And Pat, my luggage. And I don't know where my parcels were—presents for you all. And there's things I'd like—the photos, you know, and all that."

He spoke almost awkwardly. Under his jaunty exterior, he was sentimental, she knew.

"I can trace them," Pat reassured him.

She went to the patients' depository, found the belongings which had been checked in with him automatically, brought up the case. He insisted on looking through it, but she knew the effort was painful.

"That's for Mum, a silk shawl; and a scarf thing for you. Cigars for Dad, no duty. It's a funny thing, but I can't find that picture of you I had with the little cat. You ought to be honoured that you were my pin-up girl in the hut."

"You must have been hard up," teased Pat. "And you will be pleased to hear that that little Gypsy cat has had six kittens. You can guess what Dad says."

"Six for Gypsy! Bless my soul! Shows you what happens when I leave the country," said Tom.

"Yes. Mum said we'd wait for you to name them, but we had to start with Amber and Ginger."

"Maybe that picture will turn up some time. It was queer, you know, Pat, when we were all crowded into our hut, with the bunks so close to the table, and the gale and the cold outside, we appreciated things more. The chaps were good sports, everyone as keen as mustard on his job. We talked about why couldn't men live together without wars and strikes and anger. We were all in it together. Kent Willerby dragged a sledge like the rest of us when the 'weasel' went out of action. It's owing to him we all kept so fit. He seemed to like hearing about you all."

He moved his arms restlessly.

"What is it?" asked Pat.

"It's just that I can't feel anything yet. Didn't know if my feet were still there."

"What do you think we're covering with that cradle?" teased Pat, but her anxiety grew.

Sister Cunningham came across the ward.

"Come along, my gel," she said.

"Yes, Sister," said Pat with docility.

"Hard-hearted creature," said Tom, and actually winked at Sister.

From this distance Pat could see the sudden clenching of his fists.

"You've cheered him up," said that stiff woman, actually unbending.

"He doesn't realize what—might happen," breathed Pat.

"If he does, he's the sort that wouldn't say," said Sister.

Pat clasped her hands. Tom threatened with paralysis, one leg, if not two, useless for the rest of his life. Tom, whose joy had been walking and riding and swimming, who loved the open air.

"Pull yourself together, my girl," said Sister Cunningham, not unkindly.

She was dismissed. And now she could go back to sleep. But she could not settle, even with darkened curtains, even with the notice "Do not disturb" on the door. She had to get up and put her mind on her studies. At least they by-passed her main fears.

It was arranged that Captain and Mrs. Merriford should come to visit Tom during the next week.

It was an ordeal for them all. Pat wondered if it were not most for herself, since she had the medical knowledge which they could only surmise. And she must camouflage her own anxiety with briskness and confidence.

For things were not going well with Tom. His own temperament was against him at this early stage. He was impatient, he was dismayed at his weakness, his anxiety betrayed itself in irritability, and a rising temperature at night. But before his parents, Pat knew that he would play his part as well as he could.

"Hullo, Mum!" he said gaily. "Trust me to fall in soft. Tired of snow and penguins to eat, come back to the fat of the land. But never expected rice pudding."

Mrs. Merriford did not speak. She hugged him instead, looking over his head at Pat on the other side of

the bed. The Captain cleared his throat and stared down the ward at the interested occupants of the other beds.

Pat heard him muttering to himself, probably uncomplimentary words about the hospital, but at her touch on his arm he straightened himself and was unnaturally jovial.

"Give me exercises in the mornings," Tom was saying in disgust.

"Quite a plum for the nurses," Pat heard herself saying in a high, clear voice. "All my friends come and say can they do anything for Tom?"

"That's right," said a sepulchral voice from his neighbour, Ginger, in the next bed. "No chance for us with these bloomin' Arctic heroes."

"I've told you before, Antarctic, you old josser," said Tom.

"All the same to me," was Ginger's reply. "Only thing is I get a chance to see my favourite, the girl whose coloured hair matches mine."

The stale old joke made them all smile with intensity.

Ginger was a special privileged person, the retired batman of a military personage.

Pat felt as if her very heart were raw with the effort to be ordinary, knowing that the others were acting too.

"Exercises, Mum," Tom was explaining. "The silly thing is it makes me so tired, so exhausted. If the blithering idiots knew what they were doing, or told you something——"

Pat laughed and tossed her head at the usual complaint.

"You know enough for your own good. You're not nursing yourself, and don't you go disturbing Night Nurse again. She doesn't like it."

She wished that she hadn't said that, for her mother gave her a quick glance.

"Dr. Willerby brought me some of the 'stills' which were taken," he said. "Look, here's our hut, and the day we gave ourselves a dinner party, aren't the details clear? You can see the pictures pinned up on the wall. That was my bunk, and you can even see the pictures of home—you at the end! Now I wonder where the dickens that one can have got to?"

"Don't worry about it, it doesn't matter," said Pat, recognizing the invalid's insistence on trifles.

Matron was strolling down the ward at the correct distance from Kent Willerby.

Immediately Pat felt that flutter of interest in the other patients. And she noticed that odd stiffening of Tom's manner to Kent Willerby.

Facing Kent now across the bed, she felt how odd it was to hate and love a man at the same time. She noted that Kent had not recovered from that air of strain on his first arrival. He was still brown after exposure to the air and sea, but his skin was taut, his mouth firm.

She thought if she did not cherish her resentment, she would be sorry for him, she would go on loving him. What a fool she had been to cherish those odd memories! He was Dr. Kent Willerby, far removed from her by his engagement to Janet Westbrow.

She watched every little mannerism which she knew so well, she watched him greet her mother with courtesy, her father with dignity. Captain Merriford was

slightly awed by the hospital atmosphere, by the starched stiff cap of Matron. Pat watched Kent almost jealously for a false move, for something for which she could blame him, but it was as if her heart melted in his presence. She could have screamed at him, she could have put her arms round him, the conflict within her made her lower her eyes and stand stiffly, correctly, the nurse on duty even here.

Dr. Willerby had been explaining the treatment to the Merrifords.

"I'm not in charge of the case," he said "But Sir Hubert has kindly let me come along at times, and as he is at an International Conference this week, I made the opportunity."

Pat knew that the conference threw more work on his shoulders, that he had had no let-up since his return. And again jealousy of Janet, whom she had defended, and who had turned so surprisingly into Kent's fiancée, rose in her.

The Captain was silently mollified, he was unbending slightly. Kent in certain moods could get round anyone, thought Pat, with a new touch of anger.

Mrs. Merriford unpacked some eggs and her own preserves.

"They'll be labelled and go into the kitchen," Pat reminded her.

"He always did like my black-currant jelly. And Duchess always gives the best eggs," her mother said wistfully.

The Captain snorted at this word of praise for his enemies.

"Thanks for the 'stills,'" Tom was repeating, but distantly. "And look, here's the June celebration? Re-

member old Duguid and his interminable Scots stories? Never thought my pictures would come out so clearly. But we haven't found Pat's yet."

She surprised a quick glance from Dr. Kent Willerby.

It was time for them to go, that hateful moment of leave-taking, when the fears they had all worked so intensely to cover up came to light again.

"At least Pat's within reach of you," said Merriford.

"Lot of good that is," said Tom gaily. "She's always about with her New Zealand boy-friend."

It would be the moment for her to colour, thought Pat, and Matron gave her a cold glance.

Dr. Kent Willerby was escorting Mrs. Merriford from the ward. She had paused to smile at Ginger and at the youngster in the end bed. Captain Merriford pumped his son's hand.

"Soon get you out of this damned place," he commented gruffly. "Might be worse, my lad."

Tom's face against the pillows had a great weariness.

"Maybe," he said. "Sometimes I think--not much."

Ginger cackled with laughter.

"You're a fine one to talk," he said. "How would you like--"

"Now then, Ginger," Pat said brightly, for she knew the old man's delight in gory details of his past operations. "Don't go boasting."

She was conscious as she had never been before of the pressure of illness on the strange human mind, of the mixture of courage and small emotions, of the odd pride taken in the internal mysteries, even turned into Ginger's mispronunciation.

She smiled down at the old man, for she knew, and

she wondered if he sometimes guessed, that he might never leave the hospital alive, and his courage matched his gaiety and his atrocious language.

"Always liked your colour hair," he chuckled. "Somebody stole your picture, eh? Not surprised? One of them housemen who grumble if they're called out at night. Or maybe it was the doctor. Wouldn't put it past him."

"You say the silliest things," she said severely. "We'll cut out your supper tonight. I must go."

She turned back to Tom, to note the weariness, the flat mood after the excitement of his visitors had gone.

"I'll bring some papers and books for you later," she promised.

"It makes me mad. Mum looks ten years older. I wanted——"

He turned his head on the pillow.

"Bang him on the head with the teapot," sang old Ginger, and Tom raised himself indignantly, and then as if the old man's impudent hairy face reminded him of another's pain, he subsided.

"Sorry," he grunted.

"Go on with you," said Pat briskly. "Tea will be coming up. And you may have Ann to start your exercises tomorrow morning. You will like her. Bye-bye. See you soon."

But she was more concerned for him than she had imagined. He was slipping back, he was not helping himself. In the nerve weakness of the legs, of the spinal trouble, he was allowing depression to creep over him.

"Dr. Willerby is giving your people tea in Matron's

room," said the Junior, panting by with the trays of tea and bread and butter.

Pat went along the familiar hospital corridor. She had never taken fears too seriously, although she had met severe illness and death here. If Tom let himself become hopeless, if the worst happened, she could not bear to stay on here at St. Antholin's. And Kent Willerby, what would he feel if Tom were lost? Her heart ached, she felt as if the other agonies of this place were pressing on her too hard. She knew why patients longed for drink, for drugs, for the blessed forgetfulness of sleep.

"Think you're someone just because you're Second Year," hissed the Junior, steaming past her. "And I've got Potty Round wished on me again this evening."

A shaft of sunshine came through the angle of the window. Beyond were the old plane trees which had seen so many tragedies and still survived.

In Matron's room, tea on a tray had just arrived. The hot tea had brought the colour back to her mother's face.

"I'm driving into the country myself tonight, in about half an hour," said Dr. Willerby, stretching his legs under the desk with an air of relief. "Any help to you, Captain Merriford?"

Mrs. Merriford looked at her husband pleadingly. It was quite likely that he would refuse this olive branch.

"What do you say, Marian?" he asked slowly.

"That is so kind of you, Dr. Willerby," she answered, and for a second Pat saw through the tired veil of middle age that her mother might once have been a pretty girl.

"I'll be down in a moment," he said.

They all went down to the front door together. Dr. Willerby's car was parked in the usual place, and standing beside it was a small, dainty figure in pale grey.

Pat could not have turned back now. Of course, it was quite reasonable for him to be driving off with his fiancée.

As the three Merrifords approached the car, to wait for the arrival of the doctor, Janet looked at them in surprise.

"Dr. Willerby has just offered to drive my people down," said Pat quietly, her voice, she was glad to know, under control.

"Oh, has he?" asked Janet doubtfully. "I'm to spend a few days with his mother, and we're late already."

"We could quite easily go by train," whispered Mrs. Merriford tactfully.

But Captain Merriford, once the invitation had been given, and once he had adjusted his mind to it, was not to be fobbed off, even by a pretty girl in grey.

"He'll be here in a minute," he boomed. "Very kind of him, I'm sure."

"Miss Janet Westbrow, my father and mother," Pat introduced them.

Janet did not look entirely pleased. Of course, if she had expected a pleasant journey with her fiancé, it was no fun to take a detour with a middle-aged couple wished on her.

Then Kent Willerby came flying down the shallow steps.

"Hullo, Janet," he said casually. "Well, here we all are. I knew you wouldn't mind my taking the Merrifords and dropping them first. Hop in, all of you."

"Bye, darling," Pat kissed her mother, patted her

father's shoulder. "Well, you've seen that Tom's in good hands. Good-bye, Janet."

"We must have that lunch together we've promised ourselves," said Janet graciously.

Bet she forgets all about it, thought Pat. If I ate food with her, it would choke me, and I've heard quite enough from the other girls at meal about "my ring, my trousseau, my fiancé, my house, my father, my new car" to last me a lifetime.

She was glad to turn from the little face under the fair hair, that atmosphere of proprietorship towards Kent Willerby which infuriated her.

She might hate him, but she had to confess that he had done everything in his power for Tom, he had soothed Mrs. Merriford's fears, he had even succeeded in quelling Captain Merriford's wrath.

He nodded to her distantly, stepped into the car. Then he looked back at Pat, retreating to the lowest of the shallow steps. He was backing, leaning from the door to watch the manœuvres of the car, then he glanced again at Pat. He was so near to her, yet so far away in the car, with his fiancée beside him. Yet the glance which met Pat's was so unhappy, almost pleading, that she could not help being disturbed.

If he heard those words from me about it being all his fault that time I was with Lee, thought Pat. One of these days, if there's a chance, I'll speak to him.

Tom's condition did not improve. His spine had been damaged, there was no feeling in one leg, and hardly any in the other.

Pat knew that he was often in pain, that he was drugged, that sometimes he rambled when he was coming out of the drug.

"It's not fair, not fair," he was repeating drowsily one evening when she had slipped up to see him after her day's duty was finished. "He's got everything——"

Pat thought he was wandering.

"Hush, Tom," she said gently.

He stared up at her with drowsiness.

"You don't understand," he said. "Easy for him to come in here and talk."

He was muttering words she could not hear.

"Tom," she said again softly.

He looked up at her with a reproachful expression which ignored her.

"He's got Janet. Going to marry Janet. What chance had I got with her? Didn't know if he'd stick to it when he got back. He was strange with me all the trip home. What chance have I got now with her? It's so cold outside—the whiteness gets on your nerves."

His voice tailed off. He did not know what he was saying. But the first words must have been true, thought Pat wretchedly.

Janet! So that was the secret Tom held, that was the reason for his strange attitude to Kent Willerby.

Pat had been puzzled because Tom seemed suddenly to have changed in his attitude to Kent Willerby. Always with him now he was silent and unco-operative. Janet must be the reason.

CHAPTER SIX

Poor Tom! No wonder then he was gathering his hate and resentment together in his mind, opposing Kent Willerby, unconsciously regarding his own chances of recovery.

And they were slight enough, Pat knew, with a heavy heart.

Tom came out of his delirium, was quiet the next time Pat saw him. She did not know whether it would be wise to tackle him on the subject. Better leave it alone.

She had tried to evade Janet's pressing invitations several times, but when at last the other girls were invited too, she could not in decency refuse.

It was a cocktail party at the same hotel where the farewell to the expedition had been held. Pat wished that she had not come, as she went up the steps with Ann, for the place held too many memories of that particular evening with Kent Willerby. It would mean nothing to him, she decided savagely, probably there were other places with memories of girls he had kissed good-bye.

Then she knew that was only her impulsive temperament in play. That was not true of Kent Willerby.

"And how is your brother going on?" asked Janet, tripping up to Pat. "So nice to see you all from dear old St. Antholin's!"

"Didn't talk like that when she was there," Ann whispered.

Pat, sad as she was, could not help an answering smile. She knew that not so did a loyal Antholin nurse speak. You grumbled, you criticized the arrangement of the corridors, the steepness of the nurses' staircase, but deep in your heart there was a queer, steadfast affection which you would not betray for worlds.

Pat, glass in hand, remembered the leap of her heart when she first was called to the Casualty Section, the sound of the rubber-wheeled operation trolley, the clang of the lift gates, the rustle of the plane tree leaves on night duty—all these things woven into the fabric of her life like—like the love for someone who would never understand it.

"And how is your brother?" asked Janet again. "Such a sweet creature. And so excited when he landed at Port Lyttelton—you know, the port for Christchurch. And we all went about together, and I was staying at Nina's too. I told you about Lee's sister, didn't I? You never saw such a lovely place. I can hardly wait until she comes to England this summer. She has everything she wants—a rich husband, my dear! Of course, she has step-children, David and Monica, and two of her own, and she manages them all so beautifully."

She floated away.

"I can never make out whether Janet really does think this of people or whether she can't bear her geese not to be swans," said Ruth Bowman crossly. "I like to call a spade a spade. All this fluffing up of everybody."

The girls were standing about in the small cocktail

lounge, reserved for Janet's party. There were a few plum-coloured velvet stools available.

"She might have remembered that nurses like to take the weight off their feet," grumbled Ruth, plunging down on the arm of a velvet settee.

"But didn't you have any idea of Dr. Willerby before you went?" asked Gail, who had no tact, only an immense curiosity.

Janet dimpled and smoothed down the fullness of her wide nylon skirt.

"We—ell, I always thought he was the nicest man there, really the handsomest," Janet went on.

As if that were the important thing about him, thought Pat indignantly. His thoughtfulness over his work, his determination to follow his dream, the trouble he had taken over his account of the expedition and his report for the medical journals—all these Janet seemed to disregard.

"Pussy licks the cream saucer. How that girl enjoys putting it over!" Gail whispered behind Pat.

"And when we met like that, and we were always running into each other, somehow—there you are. And my father approves, so everything is grand. I've met his mother, she's so sweet and rather quaint. Lives down in the country."

Pat had a sensation of sinking down into darkness.

"It was really wonderful how it all happened," continued Janet softly and soulfully in that tone which Pat hated and distrusted.

"You saw quite a lot of my brother, too, didn't you?" she asked quietly, nibbling at an olive.

"Tom? Yes, at first. Nina arranged picnics—wonderful swimming picnics. He's so fond of swimming—"

Pat felt that prick of fear which was becoming so familiar to her.

Would Tom have fallen in love with Janet if she hadn't encouraged him? Wasn't it Janet's nature to try to collect every available man within reach. Hadn't she tried that with Lee?

Tom loved swimming. Would he ever swim again?

Pat feared that the olive and her own bitter thoughts would choke her. She heard the lively conversation going on around her, the girls' light, laughing voices, scraps of gossip, speculations as to who would be the next to leave.

"I didn't expect to find you here when I flew back," said Janet, moving round to Pat again. "I thought you and Lee would surely have made a match of it."

Pat shrugged her shoulders.

"Isn't it time we went?" she muttered to Ann.

They made their excuses to Janet and she gazed at them reproachfully.

"One of these days I must run in and see Tom," she promised.

"Yes, do," said Pat steadily.

"It's queer how I always feel a bit sorry for that girl," she said as they climbed to the top deck of a bus.

"Well, you needn't," snapped Ann.

"It's just as if she were looking for something else all the time," Pat went on.

"Plain greedy, I call it," said Ann. "Never content with what she's got."

It was Pat's habit to call in on Tom in the evening.

He was watching the door anxiously, and again she felt that bitterness that he should be here, bound by

weakness. The cradle over his legs was a tragic reminder to her.

"Where have you been?" he asked, almost irritably for him.

"I've been to Janet Westbrow's cocktail party," she said thoughtlessly.

For a second she wished she had not mentioned Janet's name to him.

Now on an impulse she burst out. "Tom, you're not really in love with her, are you?"

Then she realized she had said the wrong, the hurtful thing.

"What the dickens has that got to do with you?" he demanded.

"But Janet! You hardly knew her. You might have seen her at the hospital once or twice before you went, and that party ——"

"You don't need lots of time to know who's the one for you," he said simply, turning his face away from her.

She could have echoed his words from her own heart.

"Tom!" she gazed at him. "But — but she —she's engaged to Dr. Willerby."

"Don't I know it? It was when we arrived at Wellington. We were all made a fuss of then. A chap goes a bit mad after all those months. But I could see what she wanted, who she was after. He didn't seem to play at first, and I—I wondered. But what have I got to offer a girl, a girl like that? Darn fool, that's all. Don't you say a word to anyone," he told her fiercely.

"I believe that is what is holding you back," she began. "You're holding yourself back by being miserable, by hating her and——"

"I don't hate her. Of course I don't. But I hate him."

Tom's mouth had tightened, and almost for the first time Pat saw in him a likeness to her father in one of his explosive tempers.

"The chap's got everything. Done his research, he's the success. And I'm stuck here. If he hadn't been such a clumsy oaf——"

"I know," said Pat gently. "It's hard for you, Tom. And for him, too."

"He's got everything! Sometimes I think I wouldn't mind a darn thing, if he hadn't got Janet too. And he put me here."

"Tom! Dr. Willerby didn't mean it. How could an accident like that be helped?" she said in anguish. "He'd give the world to put you right."

"I don't want to be beholden to *him*," said Tom furiously. "Films, photographs, tests of this and that, doctors round my bed, Willerby talking of electrical treatment and stuff—I'm sick of the lot of it."

"And this is so bad for you," Pat whispered, for this was settling down time, before the Night Sister came on.

Their voices, even low, might disturb the other patients.

"Tom, Tom, dear, it has to be borne, like—like other people bear things. Try to do that. I know how hard it is for you, indeed I do. It's you yourself who's doing the harm. Think of Mother and Dad and how we need you."

Night Sister was entering to take over.

Pat knew that it was time for her to go. She felt the wrench at her heart.

"Cheer up, old boy," she whispered.

She could go to supper now, but she hesitated. Then she went along a short corridor, and pushed open the door of the little panelled chapel which all the nurses knew so well. The building had been restored many times, some of the panelling was genuine, but the rest had been copied.

There were tulips gold and white on the altar.

Pat sank into a dark pew at the back.

There was a doubt in her mind which she attempted to discourage. What right had she to imagine that Dr. Kent Willerby was not at ease in that engagement to Janet Westbrow? None at all, she told herself fiercely.

But the unconscious picture Tom had given of men returning to welcome, to civilization, to flattery and the company of women, the upsurge of new vitality, would explain the attraction of Janet, even if she had not been her own charming little self.

It's just because I want to believe it that I'm thinking this, Pat argued. He's going to marry Janet, he's not the sort of man to ask a girl to marry him unless he loved her.

But I thought he loved me, another hurt part of her being protested. It's not only words, it's the atmosphere of being together.

Pat buried her face in her arms in the welcome solitude. This was hard enough to bear, without the knowledge of Tom's misery and danger.

It was quiet in the chapel, a silent reminder to her own troubled heart that so many others had brought pain here, perhaps greater than her own. What had they taken away? A knowledge of endurance, the conviction that work must go on, that today there would be strength enough for the difficult task.

Her friend, Ann Quainton, was a great help to Pat. Pat with all her impulsive vitality turned to the quiet steady nature of the other girl.

"He goes up and down more than I should have imagined," she said to Pat.

"Maybe he's more like me than I realized," said Pat dolefully.

"Sometimes he works hard at those exercises, then other times he flags. And Pat," she hesitated, "maybe that's a funny thing to say, but I don't think Dr. Willerby does him any good. Of course, he can't come often, with all the other claims on him. He's working too hard, but he comes whenever he can to see Tom. And Tom changes when he comes."

"You've noticed that?" asked Pat with a sinking heart.

"Of course, Tom isn't his case, but one can understand the interest he takes, and I know he was invited to come round this morning by old Sir Hubert. When he's there, Tom stiffens up, isn't himself, doesn't work with him. You know yourself if a patient goes 'agin' treatment or a doctor, it makes things ten times more difficult."

"Yes," said Pat.

She was coming unwillingly to a conclusion she hated. She must speak to Dr. Willerby about Tom.

But Dr. Willerby was called away to a conference, she saw him only once moving in his swift, lithe way along the corridor, and he did not stop when he saw her.

When the message from Marion came for Pat, she had a moment's fear that it was something to do with Tom, and she hurried along the corridors to the quiet

room which had become more of a refuge for consultation and advice. Surprisingly, Matron had become less of a rustling, autocratic figure, with a wonderfully intricate cap, but more of an understanding, reliable woman, with a remarkable gift for sympathy.

Or maybe I'm the one who has changed, thought Pat.

With Matron was Kent Willerby. He was half-sitting, half-leaning against the important desk in the way she knew so well. His hands were in his pockets, and he was very serious.

He looked older than when she had seen him last, fatigued. He did not look the happy bridegroom-to-be. At sight of him, all Pat's resentment, her cherished hatred, fell away from her. She could have run to him and put her arms round his neck, she longed to ask how she could help him.

"Dr. Willerby thought he would like a talk with you about your brother," said Matron in her quiet voice.

"Yes," said Pat.

Her hands were folded in correct fashion, she was conscious of the vague sounds of the hospital, the traffic from outside the windows, voices of student nurses suddenly sinking into whispers as they passed the august door.

Dr. Willerby raised his eyes, and she felt a shock at the unhappiness in them. He's suffering so because of Tom, she thought. He'll never forgive himself. Oh, it isn't fair that this should have happened to both of them like this. The two I love so much.

"I'm not satisfied about your brother's progress, Nurse Merriford," he said abruptly. "I wondered if you knew of anything which is likely to hold him back—something on his mind."

Nothing you can cure, thought Pat. Dare I tell you that your visits, your attentions don't help him, that deep down Tom grudges you your fiancée.

"It was Nurse Quainton who suggested this," Kent Willcrby went on, as if impatient at Pat's silence. "I must say she has done very good work in the Passive Exercises, but I'm not satisfied."

Pat glowed at this praise of Ann.

"Tom was never like this when we were on the expedition together."

"He's not really a moody person," said Pat. "But I do know that he's worried about the future."

"It's more than that," said Kent decidedly. "He's changed. It is important to him, and to me. I can't forgive myself. I must know what is wrong between us. Can you help me?"

Pat had never seen him like this before. She realized that he was a man who kept a tight rein on himself. She remembered those words he had told her about his strange, lonely childhood. He needed help, as Tom did.

But if he were unhappy like this, how could she make things worse for him by telling him that Tom was in love with his lovely Janet? And how could she face Tom if she betrayed what was his pride and his misery?

She did not think for one moment that Janet had encouraged Tom with anything more than a light-hearted flirtation, first on that evening of the farewell party, and then on the return of the expedition to New Zealand. She had transferred her affections, if indeed her affections had been engaged, very quickly to higher game.

She stood silent.

"It's so difficult," she said at last. "Tom worries about his future. He did want to help the family."

She was temporizing, and she saw a flash of anger in Kent Willerby's deep-set blue eyes.

"You know quite well that the expedition fund will cover that," he said testily. "There is some resistance in his mind, which stands in the way of the treatment. He has physiotherapy, he has the best we can give him, but I feel that there is something lacking. It's not enough."

Matron had been watching them from her seat at the desk.

"He's a young man. There is time. Give him time, Dr. Willerby."

He turned round towards her and struck his clenched hand on her desk.

"Time! When every day I blame myself for my criminal negligence, for what I have destroyed. I must put it right. I must find out."

With an effort Pat said: "I—I don't know. I'll do what I can."

By the flash in those deep blue eyes she saw that he did not believe her.

He turned to Matron again as if he could not bear to look at her. Pat read dismissal in Matron's lifted eyebrows and her nod.

When Kent Willerby moved to hold open the door for her, she could not look him in the face. She discovered that she was as hot as if she had been running a race. At the end of the corridor there was a glass door leading into the courtyard.

Under the plane trees, now a mass of swaying green leaves, were the old wooden seats, and there sat a few

of the convalescent patients. She moved towards the light and air instinctively.

"Hullo, red-head!" It was old Mr. Andrews, who had been one of her first patients.

She smiled at him, asked: "How are you?"

"They're sending me home again with ~~a~~ few more patches in my inside, but with that stomach of mine, I shouldn't be surprised if I had to come back again some time."

He spoke with that doleful enjoyment of his misfortunes which she remembered.

Running through that tapestry of discipline and tradition and nursing knowledge had been that thread of her love for Kent Willerby. It had been a girl's dream, of pleasure and happiness and hero-worship, but time and knowledge had changed it to this painful love. For a moment she could have wished that she had never known him and loved him.

"Why, you're bothered, Nurse. It's about your brother, isn't it?"

Even old Mr. Andrews, with his preoccupation with his own troubles, could give her sympathy.

Pat nodded, for she could not trust herself to speak. The light fell softly through the green leaves across the old grey flagstones, she felt the warmth of the sun on her shoulder.

"Nay, lass, while there's life, there's hope," said old Mr. Andrews surprisingly. "And what mun be endured, can be endured."

He, the tiresome old patient, was comforting her, the nurse.

Tom was the one who mattered.

If she were lucky, she might be just in time to catch Kent Willerby.

Yes, he was there, moving away from her along the corridor.

"Dr. Willerby! Could I speak to you for a moment?" Her voice was breathless.

He swung round on her, his eyes on her bright hair, slightly disordered under the stiff white cap, on the colour rising to her cheeks at the knowledge of her own unorthodox behaviour.

"Yes?" he said brusquely.

It was hard to say the words, much harder than she had imagined.

"I don't quite know, but I wondered—I just thought if it might be better if you didn't see Tom at all? I know it sounds unreasonable, but—"

He was staring at her.

"If when he sees you he remembers how it all happened—"

"Is that it?" His voice was cold now. "I see. You mean that he distrusts me."

"Not exactly," Pat cried. "It's just that the—the feeling, the memories come back. And the expedition, too, when he was so well and happy out there and enjoyed all the adventures. He has told me so much about the other men, and the sing-songs in the evenings, and the dogs, and the penguins—"

Her voice tailed away, for she had been spinning words to mask the unpalatable truth.

He was hurt, terribly hurt, and it was she who was dealing him this blow. She had angered him, in his friendship for Tom, in his professional pride.

"So I'm not wanted? Not forgiven, is that it?" he said.

He put out a hand and grasped her wrist, hard so that his touch hurt.

"How you Merrifords hate me for this accident! You too, Pat!"

She moistened her lips at this attack. She could not argue with him here.

And with her own suffering was the knowledge of his hurt. But how would it make the situation better if she told him of Tom's forlorn, foolish, hopeless attachment to Janet, the girl he was going to marry?

The Merrifords did not show much sense in their love affairs, she thought sadly.

"There is something else, I'm sure," he said quickly.

As her silence continued, he added: "I'm sorry if I've detained you."

He had spoken from an icy distance. At once the ordinary businesslike relationship of doctor and nurse was re-established.

She watched him walk away from her, bitterly conscious of all that divided them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pat was thankful that work claimed her, did not object even when she was told at short notice that she was to go on loan to the Women's Surgical Ward.

At the end of the week, just as Pat was going to lunch, Sister Willoughby, known as "Wings", for her habit of floating through wards with her head up, arms slightly extended, as if she were expecting to be airborne any moment, said: "Emergency. Appendix op. Someone important. Can you take over the ward, and see her into the theatre?"

When she took down the patient's name she exclaimed in surprise: "Louise Westbrow! Why, is she any relation?"

"Yes, it's Mrs. Westbrow, Janet's mother. Taken ill quite suddenly in a taxi. Her husband phoned here. Of course, he'd send her here, and she's a special."

When the patient arrived Pat looked at her with interest. Janet's mother did not resemble her daughter, and she showed neither good looks nor animation. It was obvious that she was nervous of herself.

"I do hope it will be all right. Jake—I mean, Jacob—is always so optimistic."

"It's quite a simple matter," Pat assured her, as the Junior began to get her extra pillows. "We have so many here, you know."

"And Janet will be so upset. I was going shopping. It's so awkward."

She was a square, middle-aged woman, with beautifully cut hair, well-kept square hands, a figure which was restrained by careful dieting.

When she came round after the anaesthetic, she spoke thankfully to Pat.

"It will be quite a rest for me. And I shan't be able to go home for a few days."

"It's so sensible of you not to worry," said Pat tactfully, surprised that the one lament of every middle-aged woman patient—"But I must go straight home, I've got so much to do"—was not repeated in this case.

"Do them good to manage on their own," said Mrs. Westbrow.

There was a telephone in her room, and she answered calls cheerfully. Her husband was in Scotland, and obviously spoke of flying down to her, but she put him off.

"The loveliest excuse, the hospital!" she said. "Wonder I didn't think of it before. I expect Janet will be round to see me any minute now."

Messengers arrived with fruit and flowers. Mrs. Westbrow, luxuriously polishing her finger-nails, divided the gifts among other patients.

"It's very generous of you," Pat said, when she had brought her the prescribed drink.

She did not say that it was not always the richest patients who shared their gifts the most. She was beginning to like Mrs. Westbrow.

"I never have got used to having all this lot of stuff," said Mrs. Westbrow, and now her voice had relaxed from its usual careful accent. "Never seems quite fair to me. All very well for Janet and Jake—I mean,

Jacob—to take it for granted. I never have. I don't say I don't get a lot of pleasure out of my mink, but all the same, when I remember—I was very proud of a little wool scarf I knitted myself when Jake—I mean, Jacob—was courting me."

Not for the first time Pat saw that the hospital atmosphere stripped off the veneer of money, position, of usual environment.

Jacob Westbrow had laid down a part for his wife to play, and no doubt she played it, but the delight with which she sank into the hospital routine, the sloughing off of responsibility amused and saddened the girl.

Janet flew in many times to see her mother. She had telephoned constantly.

So she did care for someone beside herself, thought Pat grudgingly.

Janet nibbled at her mother's grapes.

"Darling, I did want you to help me choose some of my trousseau," she was saying pathetically. "We could have run over to Paris —"

"Doctor says I'm to rest," said Mrs. Westbrow, enjoying herself, and she dared to throw a slight wink at Pat.

"So much to do, and Kent doesn't seem to take much interest in a flat or a house in the country. Says he leaves it to me."

"He knows you'll have your own way in the end," beamed Mrs. Westbrow. "The nicest man you've ever had. For goodness' sake remember he's a doctor, Janet. He can't always be at your beck and call."

"I should know that, shouldn't I?" asked Janet, turning round to Pat. "After all, I've had hospital experience."

"I never thought you'd stick it," said Mrs. Westbrow comfortably. "And I always thought you'd have a man with more time to play, like that thin boy you used to run around with—"

"Of course, Kent is wonderful," said Janet hurriedly. "And you know how fond I am of him—"

Mrs. Westbrow nodded, but her expression belied her agreement.

When Janet had gone, leaving a trail of expensive perfume, an impression of haste, and a list of pleasurable engagements, Mrs. Westbrow said: "Funny girl. She's my daughter, but I never felt—"

She looked at Pat, in her stiff white apron, the pleated cap on her red hair.

"What's your mother like?"

"Oh, Mum's a darling," said Pat. "And she's such fun, too. She doesn't make a trouble of things."

Her father could easily have been regarded as a trial and even a tragedy of wasted talent, but her mother, through some loving quality of her own, never admitted it.

"Well, none of us have all we want, I suppose," said Mrs. Westbrow with a sigh. "I'm sure I hope Janet will be happy. Always has been a self-willed little monkey. There was only one man who wouldn't stand her nonsense—"

Perhaps that was how Kent Willerby had won her, Pat thought painfully.

"That reminds me, I must have a chat with Kent when he comes in to see me. Said he'd call this afternoon. I think the pink bed-jacket, don't you, Nurse?"

Pat laughed.

"Well, it isn't every woman who has such a charming son-in-law," defended Mrs. Westbrow. "I want to tackle him about the date for the wedding. I know he's busy, but I do think before the season is over—"

Pat hoped that she would not be available that afternoon, but the Junior had a cut finger which was turning septic, so it fell to Pat to take in the afternoon tea.

She entered brightly, bearing the tray, to find Kent sitting companionably beside Mrs. Westbrow's bed, unusually at ease, smiling at her remarks. He stood up when Pat entered, his face changed.

To see me reminds him of Tom, thought Pat swiftly.

"Ah, here she is," chatted Mrs. Westbrow. "When I see that red hair coming through the door, I always feel better."

"I expect you know that this patient is a fraud, Dr. Willerby," said Pat smoothly. "I'll leave you now, Mrs. Westbrow. And this is the cake your daughter sent in."

"Now, don't go," said Mrs. Westbrow fretfully. "You can surely pour the tea. Isn't she attractive, Kent? I wonder she hasn't been snapped up. Janet said there was someone in the offing. From New Zealand, isn't he?"

Pat did not answer this retailing of the grapevine of gossip which worked in any hospital. She poured the tea gravely, took the cup to Mrs. Westbrow's table, handed the other cup to Kent Willerby.

"Ah, now I can see you've got a temper, after all," said Mrs. Westbrow penitently. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, my dear, but sometimes a girl can keep a man hanging on too long."

With an effort Pat kept her well-known temper from exploding.

"And if you're going home on week-end leave," Mrs. Westbrow went on anxiously, "I want you to take some of this stuff—the peaches aren't quite ripe today—and the chocolates to your mother. And tell her she's a lucky woman to have a girl like you."

Pat wanted to sling the presents back at Mrs. Westbrow, but the pathetic, pleading expression of the richest woman in the private wards made her hesitate and say her thanks with docility.

"How are your people, Nurse?" asked Kent Willerby, stiffly, as he put down his cup and saucer.

"My mother is much better. She comes to see my brother one week, and then my father comes the next week. It's a—rather trying time."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"I've thought of someone else—another consultant. Maybe—"

He stood up, smiled down at Mrs. Westbrow.

"Thanks for the tea, Mother-in-law. But you are a fraud, you know. And we'll continue our discussion over dinner next week."

He looked at Pat gravely and went out.

"And we haven't got any further," lamented Mrs. Westbrow. "Anyone would think he doesn't want to get married! All this fuss about dates and engagements and going to America! Janet won't like it."

Pat's heart leapt as if she were a prisoner whose sentence was postponed.

"I know there's a special conference in New York," she ventured.

"Oh, well, Janet will have to put up with it. Always

wanted what she couldn't get. Used to be so fond of going to all these motor races in France and Italy, all over the place, just because Jake—Jacob—didn't approve of them. But I think she's settling down nicely with Kent now."

Pat took the tray away, set it down with such force that a cup slipped and broke before she could prevent it.

"If I'd done *that*!" said the Junior reproachfully.

There was a telephone call from Lee, back from the provincial hospital where he had been assigned for further experience.

"Meet me this evening?" he asked.

"There's some study I ought to get in," said Pat weakly.

"Nonsense, my girl. You sound blue, you need livening up."

Pat agreed, and was glad she had accepted his invitation. They sat in the cosy little upper-room of the restaurant Lee liked, after the theatre.

"Well?" asked Lee, resting his elbows on the table. "Am I any nearer the top of the class? I might tell you that Grandfather is scared to death that I'll get hooked up to a girl who's after my money—at least, his money. Nina's been playing my hand for me. And here's a bit of news. She'll be her husband and family and all, next week. Taken a house in the country. Trust Nina to get a move on when she wants it. And she doesn't have to ask the old man for a cent, as I do. She's longing to see you."

Pat looked down at her hands, folded on the lap of her pale blue dress.

"People think I'm going to marry you. I suppose it's my fault," she said miserably.

"Here," said Lee, with a flash of his strong white teeth. "Who's complaining? Not me. While there's life, there's hope."

"I'm not fair to you," she went on.

Lee reached across the small table to take her hand.

"You've got a lot on your mind at present, my girl," he said. "Tom and your people. I know it. When you care for anyone, Pat, you care for keeps. That's what is so grand about you. If I'm willing to wait in the offing, take a chance, what the dickens has it to do with anyone else?"

"That's generous of you," Pat said slowly. "If——"

If only Tom recovered, if only Kent Willerby were safely married to Janet, if only she could put him right out of her heart, then perhaps she could make a life with the lively and affectionate Lee.

"I'm quite a little bit fond of you," she said, recovering her usual gaiety. "But not fond enough of you to give up St. Antholin's."

"I'll burn the place down and rescue you," Lee assured her in the same tone.

Pat felt brighter when she left him, as she stepped out of the taxi at the main entrance to the hospital. The old night porter, Dincross, nodded to her. Talking to him was Kent Willerby, apparently on his way out.

He glanced at her to say good night, then through the main door he saw Lee Gauntley waving to her from the steps.

Pat had a sudden irresistible memory of the buttery window over a year ago, her secret entry with Lee's help in the rain, an escapade, it seemed, of a lively younger sister of hers. She could not help a glimmer of a mischievous smile.

Kent Willerby turned abruptly and went out.

As Mrs. Westbrow's health improved, Pat was amused to see how the layers of her social manner changed.

When she depar'ed, in her smart black suit, the little fold of velvet laid so cunningly across her well-cut hair. Pat felt that she was seeing another Mrs. Westbrow.

"It's really been a lovely rest," she declared.

Even her voice sounded different, had a slight drawl, a higher pitch.

"I tell you, my dear, you must come to some of my parties," she said. "I'll get my secretary to put your name on my list, and she'll send you cards. I suppose the next thing for me will be this wedding."

And she sighed as if she were not looking forward to the prospect.

"It's all settled, then?" asked Pat, with what she hoped was a bright, professional smile.

Trousseau, fine linen and exquisite trifles of nylon, Janet in a white wedding-dress, something quite unusual, of course, veil, the organ and the choir, and beside her--Pat drew her breath in a gasp.

If she could only last that long, she thought, then the pain would be over for ever. There would be nothing to regret but her own foolishness. No one knew her secret. She had her work, she had her family, there was Tom to be worked for and comforted. And all those resolutions made not the slightest difference to the anguish she felt.

"I wish I could have stayed on a few days longer," said Mrs. Westbrow, almost wistfully.

"Well, I shouldn't be here then to look after you," said Pat, as they shook hands. "I'm leaving Women's Surgical and going over to the Men's next week."

"Much nicer for you," said Mrs. Westbrow with satisfaction. "You might find a nice husband there."

Pat had to laugh then.

"Isn't it funny? Even our best patients think there's nothing to be done for men except smooth their pillows and hold their hands while they make love to us. I can tell you, Matron would take a very poor view of that."

Mrs. Westbrow vanished from sight in the lift, and Pat thought with melancholy satisfaction that at least that chapter was over. She need have nothing to do with the Westbrow family after this.

She was being taken on her first round of the Men's Private Ward.

"There's a darling old fusspot colonel," Sister was explaining. "And a Viennese musician who wants the radio on for his own programme and goes up in the air if it's something different, and there's a dashing creature who's had a car crash - Terry Hiam."

As far as Pat was concerned he was a docile patient.

She had not expected that Mrs. Westbrow would remember her promise. Patients were inclined to be sentimental and effusive when they left, and then would often forget promises.

But Pat received an invitation to a dance which was being given by several hostesses apparently, to take place at a country hotel on Saturday in the following week.

To her astonishment Lee rang up.

"Do I owe this to you?" he asked. "Invitation to Mrs. Westbrow's 'do'? Maybe because I'm Nina's brother, and so I'm on the list of Janet's hospitality pay-backs."

"I'm glad you're going," said Pat with relief. "Then I shall know someone there."

"The first kind thing you've said to me for a long time," he teased.

Pat consulted Ann about the question of a new frock.

"That green one is too ancient, and the hem's torn," she confided.

"Well, you're not spending money on a holiday," said Ann sympathetically. "Why don't you splash on a new one? It's bound to be a very smart occasion."

Ann, although the thriftest of mortals herself, would always abet her friends in extravagance.

Pat did not need the advice. After her shopping expedition she returned to the hospital with a large cardboard box, and an expression of mingled guilt and rapture.

"I don't know what possessed me," she said, when Gail and Ruth and Ann joined her in her cubicle. "I think I went mad in the shop. Only the girl was so nice. And—and what do you think of it?"

"A white dress! But of course, Pat, it will be grand with your hair!" cried Gail.

"And it looked marvellous on. She had a slinky black velvet, but I—I didn't want black," said Pat hurriedly. "And I've had green, and I can't wear pink, and——"

"Try it on," said Ruth stolidly, through the toffee hidden in her check.

Enthusiastic hands helped Pat into the dress, zipped up the fastening, and the girls stood off to admire the effect.

"It fits you perfectly," said Gail. "And that curve at the waist, and the way it sweeps out to the hem. Just

the right length. If only we could wear things like this every day!"

"Just the attire for cleaning up a trolley," said Ruth dryly. "Look at the time, Gail. We're on."

They vanished. Ann had not said a word. Pat looked at her anxiously.

"Don't you like it?" she asked humbly.

"It's lovely," said Ann. "Just like a bride. Was that in your mind?"

Pat turned scarlet.

"I would be a fool, wouldn't I?" she said, turning her head away from Ann as her friend unfastened the long zip for her.

Gail contributed a wrap, a length of Chinese red-gold brocade lined with white which had been sent by an uncle from abroad.

"Wish I could look like that in it," she announced. "You were sensible after all to stick to the white satin slippers."

Ann had nothing to lend, but she gave Pat a kiss and a hug as she was ready to go.

"You look marvellous," she whispered, unusual words from her.

Lee gave an appreciative whistle as Pat arrived at the car in which he was to take her.

Pat felt excitement in her veins.

It was pleasant to be driven out to the country house, to see the windows lighted, to go into a hall where peonies, ranging from palest pink to deepest crimson, filled great hanging bowls against the walls.

Mrs. Westbrow greeted Pat with an amiable word.

"I thought you'd enjoy it. My dear, that's the prettiest frock. Janet is just over there."

Janet was in white, too, but a fluffy, frilled white which foamed about her small dainty figure. Pat had the momentary satisfaction that her own white dress was as spectacular in its own way.

"So nice to see you," cooed Janet.

She made perfunctory introductions, but Lee was standing beside Pat.

"You're not wasting time on these people," he said in a low voice and with authority. "Come on, let's dance."

It was not the first time they had danced together, and they moved with ease. But Pat knew that she was watching, looking for one face, one figure.

Where was Kent Willerby?

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Lee swung Pat gaily in the dance, he said: "Best-looking girl in the room."

She laughed.

"You're prejudiced. And anyway you should say that to all your partners."

She loved dancing. She was excited by the long room with its candelabra, by the musicians who gave her such pleasure, by the press of unknown smiling people. She felt *fey*, as if she had escaped from her usual self, as if she had shed her responsibilities, her duties, as if the only purpose in life was this delicious movement to the music.

She was standing at the end of the dance while the men clapped for an encore when she first caught sight of Kent Willerby. He had evidently just arrived, and Janet beside him was pouting, as if resentful of his late appearance. He was smiling a little as he looked down at her, almost as if she were a petted child, then he glanced away from her, and his gaze went straight to Pat.

To Pat there was something electrical in that glance, as if a consciousness which both had tried to stifle leapt all barriers, flashed across the crowded room from one to the other. She was proud that she looked so well, that her colour was heightened by the dancing, that the white dress was lovely on her, that her hair had its own radiant sparkle.

But it was not only admiration that his eyes had expressed. At that unguarded moment it was something more.

The music had started again.

"Come along," said Lee, and drew her into his arms.

Pat's feet moved instinctively, but her heart was pounding. Why, why, couldn't she ignore Kent, why couldn't she forget him? Why must she always read into his expression, so controlled, so restrained, so much more than was really there?

She had other partners, Lee resigning her with reluctance. She saw Kent moving past with Janet, and thought, even as she moved from her partner's arm and back again in the dance, she can't love him as I do. And for whatever reason he chose her, he can't feel for her as he could have cared for me, if I'd had the chance.

Lee took her to the buffet, which was laid out in a garden-room. The white-covered tables, the long-necked bottles in their silver buckets, the loaded dishes were only a background to Pat, for Kent Willerby came over to them. She had never seen him before in evening clothes. He made Lee look boyish and untidy and undistinguished.

The unkindness of her comparison made her turn to Lee as if to apologize to him.

"There's room at our table," said Kent.

There were other young people crowded round it, Janet laughing in the centre of them. Perfunctory introductions were made. The men brought plates and dishes for the girls' choice. Pat made her choice with care and ate her delectable sandwiches with hearty appetite.

Lee looked at her with pretended dismay.

"Does everything with such extraordinary vigour," he said. "Spilling cocoa in the galley on night duty, throwing things at Night Sister with unfailing aim, even crashing a trolley into the main switch on the night before the new wing was opened—wouldn't put anything past her."

He wagged his head at her in mock reproof.

"Not guilty, my lord," said Pat, entering into the fun.

Janet's ice-spoon was suspended in mid-air as she stared at Pat.

In the excitement of the moment, in the delirious sense of Kent's participation in the scene, Pat had forgotten the promise to Janet.

"Well, guilty of some, but not guilty of all," she continued gaily.

Then she remembered Janet's share in the last misdemeanour, and a sense of mischief made her hesitate. After all, what had the girl to be afraid of, now that she had left the hospital?

She hesitated, her eyes on Janet. The girl rose abruptly, rested her arm on Kent's shoulder.

"There are several other people I wanted you to meet, Kent," she said softly. "I know the others will forgive us."

He could do nothing else but rise and follow her. Pat had the sensation as if she were falling flat on her face. That absurd delirious feeling of the evening, of being in the company of Kent, had made her lose her sense of proportion.

And Janet had won by showing her proprietary ownership of Kent.

"I'll bet he's straining at the leash already," said Lee, bending towards Pat to speak in a confidential whisper.

"Why?" she answered dully.

"All proper men would."

"She's very pretty," said Pat, trying to play fair.

"Not the colour of hair I like," he told her. "A determined little woman. I bet she meant to have him from the first."

The music had started again. Pat rose from the table with a sense of relief.

"Nonsense. Why do you make him out such a--such an easy creature? As if he wouldn't know what he wanted himself."

"The little innocent," said Lee, fondly putting his arm round her, "and maybe—you never know, he might have been caught on the rebound."

Rebound, thought Pat, as she kept pace with Lee's long steps across the shining floor. But then that suggested that there had been someone else on whom Kent had set his heart before Janet. Could it be that he had cherished after all the memory of the girl he had kissed on that last evening before he sailed?

If only I knew, thought Pat wildly, and I never shall.

After the rollicking innovation of an old-fashioned square dance, of which no one knew the movements, and suggestions were called by the men from the wrong corners, Pat felt the need of cold water on her face, and fresh powder.

As she stood in front of the mirror in the cloak-room, Janet hurried in. There were other girls there, prinking before the glass, and Janet waited until they had gone. Then she came up to her.

"Did you mean that you'd told anybody about that trolley?" she demanded.

She was flushed, angry out of all proportion to the incident.

"No, I didn't tell anyone," answered Pat angry herself. "It was a joke and I don't see that it's important anyway."

"It was important to me," said Janet. "Someone said I couldn't make a good job of anything, and I—"

"Well, you haven't got to worry about it now. I did keep my promise to you. I do—keep my promises, which is more than you do."

"What do you mean?"

"At that cocktail party of yours, you said you'd go and see Tom. You've never been, never had a minute for a boy who was—was fond of you."

"Tom? Oh, no, what nonsense," said Janet.

But she had a little pleased smile.

"You'd better forget what I said," Pat went on abruptly, regretting her own impulsive nature. "It's not a very happy situation for him."

"And maybe this isn't a very happy situation for me either," flushed Janet. "You were always so sure of yourself, Pat Melford, but you needn't think you can queen it here as you did at St. Antholm's."

At this astonishing jealous version of her character, Pat could not help opening her eyes, then she began to laugh.

"I just time I heard that," she said.

"The patients talked about you, didn't they? You were always a favourite—the red-head they called you. And not only the patients—"

"Well, I don't know that I can help that," said Pat,

uncertain how to treat this outburst. Surely it must have some other foundation than the reference to the hospital incident.

"Cheer up, Janet," she said briskly. "You should be a happy girl—everything you want----"

"Oh!" exclaimed Janet, and the door banged behind her.

Now what have I said? thought Pat, half-amused, half-regretful.

As she came down towards the press of people, Kent Willerby stepped forward as if he had been waiting for her.

"I think I'm entitled to this one, don't you?" he asked in a low voice.

She felt the slightest tremble in the arm which went round her waist, and she, who was sure-footed on a dance-floor, stumbled like a shy schoolgirl.

His arm tightened round her, they were moving as one through the crowd. He steered without effort, he was smooth in his movements, and Pat felt as if she were a drowning woman, hardly conscious.

If he could have been hers, she thought vaguely. Her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, could have lain there by right. Only somewhere, somehow, the strings had pulled awry, and he wanted to marry a girl who was jealous of her. And she would have to endure the situation as best she could.

At that thought Pat flung up her head, and began to dance with a clearer sense of what she was doing.

"You do everything so thoroughly, don't you?" he said. "Pat, what's wrong with Janet?"

The question was like cold water in her face.

"Why do you ask that?"

"She's touchy over every small thing—about my being late. Surely she ought to know that my time is not my own. If I'm not making her happy,—” He hesitated.

"Of course you are," Pat said automatically. "Maybe she's been a bit spoilt and difficult to understand. Then she's always said she wanted to be a success with her father."

"I like her mother immensely," Kent said, "but privately, I can't stand her father."

Pat began to laugh at the incongruity of their conversation, the conversation of intimates.

When she was with Kent she seemed to swing from one mood to the other, from the pitch of the wildest excitement to a depth of unhappiness, then to the level of chuckling at this domestic interlude.

The music had stopped. They were beside the long window, and the soft light wind blew in refreshingly.

"Let's have a breath of flesh air. This isn't my idea of a good evening," said Kent.

"You don't like dancing?" asked Pat in disappointment.

He looked round at her with that unusual smile.

"It depends on my partner."

They were out on a flagged path which would have been dim after the lighted room if it had not been for the large lamps trained on the flight of steps. Statues stood on the balustrades, and flocks of young figures rested on the steps between the dances, eating ices, talking, laughing, flirting.

Kent led Pat along the path until they were in comparative shadow. The top of this balustrade was bare of statues.

"I'm sorry we parted bad friends," he said abruptly.

Pat sat down on the balustrade. Her eyes were becoming accustomed to the dimness, to the dark masses of the garden below them, the steps like some picture-book in movement.

"Not really," she said with what steadiness she could. "I'm sorry if I seemed to insult you——"

"You were thinking about your brother. I realized that afterwards. I'm flying to New York at the end of the month, it's not quite fixed up yet. There's a man I want to see there, a neurologist. I met him at a conference some while ago. He may be able to help—with Tom, I mean."

"It's very good of you—I feel that Tom has to help himself, too."

"I know."

He put down his hand to grasp her, and the touch was electrical. The warmth, the strength, the magnetism of it, flowed into her. She felt that she could have rested there for ever, simply with that confidence of his touch, lost, hardly conscious of her surroundings, as if the atmosphere between them were independent of words from either of them.

Then she heard Lee's voice from the window further along the terrace calling: "Pat, Pat, where are you?"

It was just like Lee's free and easy way to call out for the next dance, to interrupt a moment like this.

But the magic was broken.

"I must go," she said quickly, slipping from the balustrade.

Now she was standing so near to him that he could have embraced her, a glimmering white figure in the dimness. She knew that he caught his breath, that his

arm drew round her, tightened for an instant, that he bent to her before she moved quickly away.

"You go when Lee calls, is that it?" he asked, and she was astonished at the roughness in his voice.

She wanted to stay with him, she wanted to argue with him, cry out to him, fling her arms round his neck, and feel his nearness as she had felt it during the dance.

But some instinct warned the dizziness mounting to her brain that for her own sake, for the sake of petulant Janet, even for Kent himself, she dared not linger.

"The band's playing again," she said stupidly.

He leaned back and away from her.

"Yes, the band will always play for you," he answered savagely.

Pat had moved away from him before she realized how boyish and revealing this sudden anger was in him. But when she turned round he had gone, walking away from her.

"Oh, there you are," said Lee, catching sight of her white dress and her red hair in the light from the window. "Have I interrupted anything? I've been dancing with your friend Janet. She tells me that the wedding is fixed for the end of next month, when Willerby gets back from New York."

"That is what Mrs. Westbrow hoped," answered Pat, and she hoped he did not notice that her voice was flat and dull.

The band was the same, the lights shone as brightly as before. The scent of the tobacco plants from below the terrace floated in on the cooler air, but to Pat the magic had gone.

"Tired?" asked Lee, bending his head down to her. She nodded.

"It's terrible to admit it, but I can't stay the course."

She knew that if she had not heard those words from Lee at the window, if he had not recalled her from Kent, that she could have danced lightly until morning. And if she had been dancing with Kent, she could have lingered in his arms until—

"You mean you've had enough?" asked Lee. "Right. I'll get the car. Make your good-byes snappy."

Pat went for her wrap, said good night to Mrs. Westbrow, who was sitting on a couch fanning herself.

"Had a good time, my dear? So glad," she said. "Jacob, this is my pretty nurse I told you about."

Jacob Westbrow frowned habitually when he was deep in thought.

"Ah, St. Antholin's," he said. "Grand place, grand people. Glad to meet you. Good-bye."

Pat looked round the hall. She could not see Janet. Mrs. Westbrow beckoned Pat to lean down.

"The girl gets over-excited," she said. "Such a pity. Some kind of a scene with Kent. But it will blow over."

And perhaps I could have helped it to blow over for good one way or the other, thought Pat savagely.

She was too tired when she got into the car to care whether Lee was driving to London or to John o' Groats. She heard dimly the progress of the car along the roads, caught the occasional flash of lights, and only stirred when the car stopped in the familiar Alley outside the hospital.

"At least you have a special pass for tonight," said Lee with a yawn. "I don't believe I've the strength to lift you through the window as I've done in the past. Good night, honey."

He touched her cheek affectionately.

"Good morning," answered Pat sleepily, as she went up the steps.

The night porter admitted her.

The wonderful evening was over. The red and gold wrap would be returned to its owner, the white dress which might have been that of a bride would be placed on its hanger, and in place of a dancing girl would be the cheerful, capable Nurse Merriford.

And probably Nurse Merriford would own to her aching feet, thought Pat sleepily as she crept into bed.

She was surprised to have a telephone call from Janet.

"I was thinking of coming in to see your brother, Pat."

"You know the visiting hours," said Pat coolly. "I shall be here on Friday."

So her words had borne fruit.

She did not know whether to warn Tom or not. Perhaps the surprise would be better for him. Instead she mentioned it to Ann, who was returning after the usual exercise time.

"Janet! What on earth does she want to see him for?" asked Ann, in her straightforward way.

Pat sighed.

"I—I rather think he was in love with her. You know, that time he met her out in New Zealand. Don't for heaven's sake let him know that I told you."

Ann had turned her back on Pat while she put away some of her equipment in the cupboard.

"Perhaps she'll do him good," she said quietly.

"I doubt it," Pat answered.

On the Friday afternoon when she was visiting Tom, she watched the door, but it was late when Janet floated in. In a flowered dress, with a half-hat of rose-

petals resting on her hair, she was a pleasing vision to the patients and their visitors.

"And here's another visitor for you, Tom," Pat said gaily. "Now I've got one or two things to do, but I'll come back in a few minutes. Hullo, Janet, here's the wounded hero."

At least she could leave them together.

Ginger, in the next bed, raised his red head to croak at her.

"Who's that? His girl? Why hasn't she been before?"

"Shush, no, of course not. I'll be back."

It was more than she could resist not to turn her head and look at them from the doorway. She could see the expression of complete amazement on Tom's face, but all she could see of Janet was her back in the flowered frock.

At least they would have that time together, thought Pat. Tom would see his love again, could say good-bye to her. It would be a dreadful ordeal for him.

When she returned it was to find that Tom was the calm one of the two, while it was Janet who seemed disturbed.

"Men are frightful patients, aren't they?" said Pat. "It's just their pride and vanity, you know."

"You're always pulling hat in," said Tom easily. "Like that chap you were talking about in your own ward, the chap knocked about in a racing-car smash—what's his name?"

"Oh, yes, Terry Hiam," answered Pat. "But he doesn't take himself as seriously as you do, Tom. He says it's all in his day's work."

Glancing down, she was surprised at the change in Janet's face.

She had seen her gay and happy, she had seen her smiling with that little characteristic curl of the lip, she had seen her petulant with Kent Willerby, but never had she seen this pleading expression before.

Perhaps Janet was disturbed by Tom's plight, after all.

"Who did you say?" asked Janet in a small voice.

"Terry Hiam. Sister says he's quite famous in his way."

"Oh, yes," said Janet.

"I ca'nt come round, but I expect you could stay on if you liked," said Pat easily.

Tom was taking this interview so much better than she had expected.

"I think I'll go," said Janet, gathering up gloves and handbag. "I'm sorry I neglected you, Tom. I'll come in again."

"Nice to see you," he replied conventionally. "So long, Janet."

He was watching the girl walk the length of the ward, and Pat wondered anxiously what his thoughts were. His expression gave nothing away.

Was it vanity which had moved Janet to make this visit? What motive could she have? She remembered Ann's words that Janet did nothing without a very good reason for her own welfare.

And yet Janet had seemed disturbed.

Any girl with feeling would have been sorry for the change in Tom, for the contrast between the young sportsman she had known, and this invalid.

I supposed I misjudged her, thought Pat with a sigh, as she went off to her own ward.

As she went through the glass door she stared at a

familiar back in a flowered nylon dress. Was she dreaming? Janet had said good-bye to Tom, yet here she was in Pat's own ward, standing beside the bed where lay the gaunt young racing-motorist.

Pat was already moving towards them. The bed was directly beside her, and she could not help hearing the young man's voice.

"Come to gloat, have you, Janet?" he was saying coolly.

He was a long young man, with a thin face, a big nose and a hooked chin, as Sister Warrender had said: "A tough nut to crack."

Pat could not hear all Janet's reply, only the murmur: "I didn't know. And you might have been killed."

"That would have made news then," he answered gaily. "Who cares? A short life and a gay one."

Pat had passed out of earshot to her own table, and she was busy with some reports which had come in.

Was Terry Hiam another of Janet's conquests?

No wonder she's fond of St. Antholin', thought Pat with unusual cynicism, when all her men, well, only three of them, are tied up in here.

It was not many moments before Janet rose to leave. She gave Pat an airy wave of the hand, the flowered skirts and the dove-coloured sandals disappeared through the door.

Terry Hiam lay with closed eyes. Not for the first time Pat wished she could read her patients' thoughts as easily as she read their temperature charts.

The next day Lee rang Pat joyfully.

"Nina's arrived, and in residence," he shouted at

her. "Trust that girl. And you're to come with me for next week-end to stay. She's having a houseful. Trust Nina."

"She must be very busy. Isn't it rather soon after her arrival?" asked Pat.

"When I think of that girl getting up at dawn to do the baking for a riding party, boiling hams and making cakes—why, this is child's play to her," boasted Nina's brother.

Pat liked him in this mood.

"Where is it?" she asked. "What's the address?"

"Your county," he said. "But the other side. Stanston Manor. She's taken it furnished until the winter."

"That's a familiar name," said Pat slowly.

"Sure, Lady Willerby's place. She's renting it to Nina. Everything has fitted in very well. Apparently Lady Willerby has been wanting to get the lodge into shape for herself for some time, so she's moved in there for a while. Nina is gathering all the clans round her, we should have a gay time. I know how you feel about Tom, but you must have a break. And you're not nursing him."

"No," agreed Pat.

The chance of this holiday, the change for two days brightened her outlook. Then she blamed herself for her thoughtlessness when she went to see Tom.

He had just had his treatment and exercises given by the quiet, skilful, Ann. Pat met her at the door of the ward. She thought again how the neat, compact Ann, with her fresh complexion, would give confidence to even the most tense and anxious patient.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"A little better, I think," said Ann. "He's not an easy

person to be with. To tell you the truth, Pat, I've never felt at ease with him until this morning."

Pat went to Toin. On this heavenly day of sunlight and warmth, it must be agony for him to be caged in with elaborate apparatus, and to face the fears that perhaps he might never walk.

"Hullo!" she said gaily. "Ann says she's pleased with you this morning. The least little wiggle of a toe, and Ann goes about as pleased as Punch."

"Yes, she's a nice kid," he said wearily.

"Kid! She's as old as you are," scoffed Pat. "I've asked the librarian for the books you wanted, and Mum says she's bringing honey and fruit on Sunday."

"That's good," he said with an effort.

"If she hadn't been coming, I don't know that I would have accepted my latest invitation," Pat went on lightly. "I'm going to stay with Lee's married sister, Nina Champerdown. She's just flown in from New Zealand, and has taken a house in the country. The swift way these people do things! That's one of the delights of having money."

Toin showed more interest than she had expected.

"You go, Sis. Nina Champerdown is a jolly good sort. I shan't forget how she entertained us when we arrived in Christchurch. Drove us out to her country house. I remember that view of the Southern Alps. Lord, it seems years ago."

Then he had been a strong, vigorous creature, falling in love wholeheartedly, hopeful, happy. It was hard for him to endure this bitter sense of weakness, difficult for him not to resent Kent Willerby's success in winning Janet Westbrow.

Not for the first time Pat wished heartily that that

fair young woman had never entered the hospital or her life.

Pat met Ann at lunch in the big dining-room.

"You'll be on this week-end, won't you?" she asked. "Can you pop in to Tom when you can? I know Mother will come, if Dad doesn't, but it would be nice if you could keep an eye on him as well."

To her surprise the quiet Ann hesitated instead of agreeing at once.

"Very well, if you don't want to," said Pat hotly, aggrieved, that her beloved Tom should not take first place.

"I'll go if you wish it," she said, more distantly than usual. "I'm just a physiotherapist to him."

"Nonsense," said Pat. "Tom's shy, and he's going through a bad time."

"And so are scores of others," Ann spoke quickly. "He's no reason to mope and complain."

"Tell him so," said Pat. "Look at that clock. I must go."

She heard Ann say with quiet determination: "Perhaps I will tell him after all."

Pat had shopping to do for the unexpected week-end. The weather had become suddenly warm and sultry, and last year's cottons would not do for her.

To her surprise the car in which Lee awaited her outside the hospital was a new model, instead of the old favourite.

"How did you manage it?" she asked.

"It's for Nina, but she's lending it to me for the time being. What a sister!"

He waved cordially to someone behind Pat on the steps.

"See you later on, sir. Tonight or tomorrow!"

Pat glanced round to see Kent Willerby walking away to his own car.

Again she felt that throb of anxiety for him, he looked strained beneath the summer tan. He gave her a scant, automatic acknowledgment as he stepped into his car.

No doubt he was going to meet his Janet. And Pat was to be driven off gaily to meet the sister of the man she might easily marry.

Having admired the car, the shining blue-green enamel, the latest fittings on the dashboard, Pat asked: "Why did you say that to Dr. Willerby?"

"Of course Nina has asked him over," said Lee whisking through the traffic in his usual impetus manner. "Wasn't he one of the big noises when the expedition returned? That's when his romance with Janet began. Nina takes a maternal interest in them both. She's always trying to marry me off, too, but I have plans of my own."

She was torn between excitement and annoyance now. She had not realized that Kent and Janet would be invited. It was natural enough, she realized, since Nina had met them before, and invitations were apparently broadcast in Nina's generous, lavish fashion.

As they turned in at wide open gates on to a short well-kept drive bordered by dark, glossy rhododendron bushes, she could not help thinking this was Kent Willerby's home. They swept into a gravel circle before the few low steps which led to the portico of the Manor.

It was not a large house, but perfectly proportioned, its Georgian windows framed with roses. There was a

glimpse of lawn and striped umbrellas beyond the angle of the house.

Dogs and children tumbled to meet them, and behind them came a plump, jolly woman, in a cool dress, her eyes beaming with pleasure. ?

Pat, like most people, could not resist Nina Champerdown's overflowing good nature. She was happy in giving pleasure, she was quite prepared to override other people's wishes in that giving. Perhaps her straitened life with the mean grandfather until she escaped to marry the plump, fifty-year-old Alastair Champerdown had helped her to appreciate the pleasures of sharing.

"Darling Pat, how I've been longing to meet you," Nina said frankly, and she put her arms round the girl and hugged her. "Lee has talked so much about you, and I feel I know you. Come on in. This is David, and little Monica, and Grace, who looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But you try her! You'll see the baby later on. Down, animals!"

No one could help feeling at home with Nina, thought Pat, as she laughingly fought off children and dogs, and was escorted upstairs, to her room.

"I've shocked Lady Willerby to the core—simplified everything I can. Moved her precious breakables, and everyone helps. She's cherished her things too long, I think. She left an ancient man and his wife, and his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Brierley, comes in to help. Come straight away to the lawn, we have lunch out there."

Pat would not let herself linger on the thought that this was Kent Willerby's home. The house had been well cared for, it was obvious, the brocade curtains, the chintz covers, were in good repair. The furniture and

floors were polished. And all that meant money and time and energy, Pat knew, in the last years. Was Stanston Manor the devotion of Lady Willerby's life?

On the lawn a long table was spread with a magnificent cold lunch. Nina's husband, as plump and jolly as herself, was at the end to carve, a broad, rosy-cheeked woman served vegetables and salad.

"Mrs. Brierley comes in to help," said Nina brightly. "She's a faithful retainer of Lady Willerby's, on and off for years, I understand, but she's such a good soul and comes along to give a hand."

To Pat's surprise the woman smiled at her as if she knew her. Could she have been a patient at St. Antholin's?

Pat was waited on by Lee, David brought her an iced drink, Monica for some reason contemplated her with awe. The other visitors were New Zealanders, friends of Nina's husband. Talk and laughter surged round her. The sun shone warmly, a slight breeze ruffled the purple and crimson phlox in the border beside the tall blue delphiniums.

When the meal was over, the children rushed Lee away to the small river at the far end of the lawn. Pat lingered to pile dishes for Mrs. Brierley.

Remembering that smile, she asked the woman if she had been at St. Antholin's.

"Never been in a hospital except when I had my third," Mr. Brierley answered. "And that was in the country hospital here. But I'd have known you anywhere," she added.

"How could you?" asked Pat in astonishment.

"From the photograph," answered Mrs. Brierley

simply. "Just like you, with that cat on your shoulder, and laughing just like you did now."

Photograph! But the photograph which she was describing was the snapshot of herself which Tom had taken with him on the expedition, which he had told her he had pinned to the wall of the hut, which he had thought was lost.

"How in the world did you see that?" asked Pat slowly.

"I always do the doctor's unpacking for him," said Mrs. Brierley dealing swiftly with the trolley. "Tidy as can be at the hospital, they tell me, but he's not like that at home. Whole pile of pictures he had, and this one with pin-marks on it. Never seen the picture since, but recognized you at once."

Kent Willerby had the photograph which Tom had lost.

Pat's pulse leapt as if she were running a race. Once he had cared enough for her to descend to that childish trick of taking another man's photograph. Once he must have treasured it, as a memory, as a hope.

It was too cruel to hear this now, when he would be bringing Janet to his own house.

CHAPTER NINE

PAT went to get her swimming suit, as Nina instructed her, so that she could join the others. She felt as if she were in a dream, trying to recall Mrs. Brierley's words exactly.

The tiny fact was so important, yet it was far away. It had made no difference to Kent's proposal to Janet.

Pat caught up her swimming suit from the suitcase, rummaged for her cap, and flew down the stairs as if she were a hunted woman.

The afternoon went by with sunshine on the water, with shouts from the children and much barking by the dogs, with laughter and little chance of conversation for the adults.

Small Monica devoted herself to Pat, confiding her anxiety about her new poodle.

"Paulette isn't very well. Could a nurse do her any good?" she asked. "Or would a doctor be better?"

"There's nothing the matter with your precious poodle but over-eating," said David, with a brother's cruelty.

"Of course I'll come and look at her some time," promised Pat.

Nina arrived with the baby and afternoon tea. Long shadows lay across the lawn, the children sprawled happily on the grass. Alastair Champerdown leaned

from his deck-chair to take his wife's knitting out of her hand, the visitors smoked peacefully.

If life were always like this, thought Pat, lying back in her long chair—sunny and peaceful, with all the joys of home. Her eyes were wistful as she met those of Lee.

Never before had she felt so near to acceptance of what he offered.

She had taken him for granted in her own light-hearted way, as a good companion, given to proposing marriage at odd moments, but for the first time she felt that she was weakening, longing to escape from the torment of loving a man who could not be hers.

Nina sprang up from her chair.

"Ah, here's Lady Willerby. I asked her to come over for tea," she said gaily.

Pat studied the little lady carefully when the introductions had been made. She sat on the edge of the wicker-chair provided for her as if she disapproved of lounging. Pat was glad that she had buttoned a full, rainbow-striped skirt over her swimming suit. Somehow, at the little lady's glance, the children edged away, even the dogs scampered away as if they felt unspoken reproof.

"I hope you're quite comfortable here, Mrs. Chamberdown," she said in a sweet, fluting voice.

"Everyone calls her Nina," said Nina's husband heartily.

"It's delightful. The children are mad about the gardens and the river. The stables are full of bicycles and dogs and rubbish they've collected—I don't suppose the place will ever be the same again."

Lady Willerby winced slightly.

She looked vaguely round at the gay flower border.

"It's not what it was," she said.

"Nothing ever is," said Champerdown cheerfully. "As long as people are happy."

"I suppose my son hasn't arrived yet? He's always so unreliable," said Lady Willerby.

"What can you expect with doctors?" asked Nina.

"I never wanted him to go in for that," continued his mother. "It was bad enough having my husband away so much, almost as if he didn't like the place, and then for Kent—really, it's most unfair."

If her voice had not been so musical, her small face with its crown of white hair so appealing, the words would have seemed petulant.

"He's a wonderful doctor," Nina answered with more bluntness than usual. "He loves his work and he's needed."

Kent's mother nodded airily.

"I suppose so. He never talks about it to me, of course. He just comes and goes. When will he be here?"

"He's sure to arrive this evening. Come to dinner, Lady Willerby. We shall be a large party, and one more won't make any difference."

But the guest shook her head decidedly.

"Thank you, no. I have my own routine."

It was not long before she went, lingering for a second beside the basket in which the youngest of the family, chubby, pink-limbed, astonishingly like his plump father, slept with composure.

"Very pretty," cooed Lady Willerby. "So pretty when they're small, but a great trouble when they're older. Not an unmixed blessing, Mrs. Champerdown."

Nina saw her guest across the lawn towards the small red-brick lodge, half-hidden by its holly hedge. As she re-

turned a shout of laughter greeted her from her husband.

"Mum, what does 'not unmixed' mean?" demanded David. "I'm trying to work it out. Come on, Monica, she's gone."

Nina was flushed.

"She just needs getting used to," she said. "What a life Kent must have had. Alastair, you can take your youngest to the nursery now."

She turned to Pat.

"Now we're going for a walk round the garden, just for us to get acquainted," she said. "No, Lee, you don't come this time. You take the children off to the river to swim, and bring them back alive. Alastair, you can have your nap in the study before dinner. I know you. Then you'll be ready to give us our drinks when we come back."

Having organized her household in her swift, capable way, Nina took charge of Pat.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear about your brother, Tom," she began as they strolled across the lawn.

She insisted in friendly fashion on every detail as they went past the flower border along the rose-arched walk to the kitchen garden where Nina glanced at the wire-netting cage over the raspberry bushes.

"Haven't succeeded in keeping out birds or children," she muttered. "Would it do Tom good to come here, do you think?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid," said Pat sadly. "He sent you his love. He told me what a wonderful time you gave him, and all the expedition."

"They were all such nice boys, the whole boiling of them," sighed Nina, including a famous scientist, the forty-year-old biologist, and the ship's carpenters in her

usual enthusiasm. "We loved having them. Even my grandfather unbent, which is saying something. Lee's told you about him?"

She embarked on the family history.

"He was terrified that we should go the way of our poor old Daddy," Nina said without any inhibitions. "He could not stop spending, and always what he hadn't got. So when Daddy did finish up, over the edge of a cliff, Gran took us all on, and kept us short, and keeps a tight rein now on Lee. But I think he would loosen up if Lee married the right girl."

Pat began to laugh.

"Isn't that Lee's affair? And I've never noticed that he's taken much notice of what his grandfather said."

"It would make a great difference to him," said Nina more quietly than she had spoken before. "And he's written more about you than he has about any other girl."

There was a faint sensation of uneasiness growing in Pat. She had loved the welcome she had received, but was she perhaps being made too much one of the family? Her impulsive nature felt as if here was the tug of a rein which she had not invited.

Nina began to talk about the house.

"It's perfectly charming," she declared, "but I tell you I can't stand these Englishwomen who spend all their time and attention on just a house. I saw Lady Willerby lay her hand on an old table in the hall, it was just as if she was caressing a child. It made my blood run cold. People matter so much more than things."

"I suppose it's because she's always lived here," said Pat.

"I don't know that she made life so happy for her

husband and son," continued Nina. "I should think Kent Willerby has had her as a burden to carry most of the time since his father died. No wonder he wanted to get off to the Antarctic. . . ."

There was something so vigorous in her criticism that Pat had to smile. She felt again the young freshness which she had noticed in Lee, as if at times he were younger than she was. She had accepted traditions from her childhood, in spite of the difficult times in which she had lived.

"You think she made his life, I mean Dr. Willerby's life, and his father's, too, unhappy?" asked Pat.

She remembered those strange words as if they had been only an hour ago, Kent Willerby had said to her on that last evening. Nothing to stand in my way.

"No doubt about it," said Nina briskly. "Don't you love this view through the trees? Mrs. Brierley has been with Lady Willerby for years, you can tell Kent Willerby is the apple of her eye. And she says what a thin time he had of it. Away at school, no one for him in the holidays, don't touch this, mustn't do that. 'Very fussy, her ladyship.' No wonder he plunged himself into his career, set his heart on following his father."

Pat was listening hungrily.

"That's why I was so glad he met Janet, and fell for her," Nina went on gaily.

Pat felt as if she had had a blow between the eyes. They were walking now beside a stream where meadow-sweet was blowing in the breeze.

She was tortured between hearing of the life of the man she loved, and the realization that she played so small a part in it.

"Of course, Janet was staying with you," she said.

"I think I had a good deal to do with it," said Nina, preening herself with the pride of a happily married woman. "He wasn't a bit interested at first, I think, but anyone could see that Janet wanted him."

Pat was silent. "He was the best-looking and the age. No one would want to take on dear little Diderot, with that beard. It's funny. There were all sorts of things on, receptions, parties, picnics, everyone made much of them, you know, but I don't think Kent Willerby really went in for Janet until after he'd come to stay with us. Grandfather was there, I remember, and I read Lee's letters about you, and he said: 'I'll be glad the lad had the sense to choose a fine girl like that, a nurse for his wife?'"

"Lee and I were good friends," said Pat firmly, "and nothing more. He's known that all along."

"But you can't help the boy hoping," said Nina with a smile. "And Lee's a very optimistic type, I can tell you."

Pat opened her lips to protest. How could she put her point of view more strongly to a determined hostess? She began to see that the championship of Lee on which Nina had embarked had difficulties.

Nina squeezed her arm.

"Well, we won't talk about it any more," she said. "I can tell how a girl feels. Although I don't mind telling you I made a bee-line for Al's fair when I met him. I knew he was the one. And was I glad to escape from Grandfather, and live the way I wanted! Like this."

She stretched her arms out as if to embrace the countryside, the glimpse of the South Downs against the sky, the woodland below them, the wide lawn, and the river with the prancing figures in bathing suits.

"We'd better go back. Someone is sure to arrive while we're out here. And if the children don't have some adventure, I shall think they have lost their touch."

Pat followed her hostess' movement and turned back towards the lawn, the house at the end, the coloured umbrellas, set above the deck-chairs.

"There they are," said Nina gladly. "There's Janet, and Kent just behind her. '

CHAPTER TEN

As usual, it was not possible to tell from Kent's controlled expression what his feelings were. To Pat's surprise, Janet seemed a little nervous. She fluttered about the car, collecting coat and travel-case, as if she were not quite sure of herself.

"Janet drove me here without frightening more than two traffic policemen into a state of shock," Kent said with a glimmer of amusement. "My car is at the garage for adjustment. I should get it by Monday."

"I'm a very good driver," announced Janet, her chin in the air. "I was well trained. There's not a scratch on my car."

"Lovely to see you both again, and here in England," said Nina warmly. "Just dump your things, and if Alastair has waked up, he'll have sherry or cocktails for you."

"Would there be time just for me to run over and call on my mother?" asked Kent.

They were standing about the hall. After one glance at Pat, behind her hostess, he had not looked at her again.

"I asked her to dinner," said Nina quickly, "but she wouldn't come. I had hoped to break down the barrier."

"My dear Nina, my mother wouldn't break her own routine for anyone," he told her gently. "Don't reproach yourself. But Janet and I will walk over now."

He raised his eyebrows at Janet, and she nodded, not very graciously.

"But you must have your drink first, and I've a surprise for you. Little Diderot and Mr. Elkman are coming. And I've some other New Zealand friends you may remember—the Allinsons."

Now Kent's eyes shone with a delight which was almost boyish.

"Nina, how in the world did you manage Diderot and Elkman? Nothing I should like better than a yarn with them."

Janet was half-way up the stairs this time with Nina and Pat to guide her to her room.

"Don't say you boys are going to fight your battles all over again," she called mockingly.

There was a slight sting in her tone. Is she jealous of his friendship with the men he liked so much, Pat wondered.

Janet's bedroom was opposite to that occupied by Pat.

"You girls won't mind sharing a bathroom?" asked Nina.

She prattled away, then took the two girls to the nursery to see the sleeping infant.

"Great fat lump, looks like a cherub, or an infant Alastair," said Nina fondly. "Sleeps like an angel, never makes a sound."

As if to contradict her there was a whimper from the adjoining room.

"That's Monica, she sometimes wakes two or three times before she settles down," said Nina.

At the same time there came a call from below.

"That's for you, Janet," said Nina. "You and Kent hurry off. I'll hold dinner for an extra ten minutes."

"Shall I go to Monica?" asked Pat with diffidence. "Do, just the thing," Nina spoke cordially. "She's taken quite a fancy to you."

In the small room next door Monica looked at Pat with sleepy grey eyes as the girl's practised hand tucked in the bedclothes, adjusted the pillow.

"You never came to see Pawlette," she muttered reproachfully. "Her nose was hot."

"I'm sorry," Pat said. "Perhaps the poodle will be better after a night's sleep, you know. I'll come tomorrow, I promise."

Monica buried her nose in the pillow and was lost in sleep.

Pat hurried to change into the wide-skirted frock which Lee had said that he liked. The colour was the blue-green of a turquoise, and over it were scattered absurd little bunches of multicoloured flowers, intermixed with bows and loops.

How lovely it would be to be like Nina, with a home, an adoring husband, and the children. This house was the right place for them all. Lady Willerby might have preserved it as a beautiful house, but only a woman like Nina could make it a home.

As possibly Janet would do in the future. Pat grimaced at herself in the glass as she combed her hair.

Yes, Janet would be here, if Kent wished to keep on the house. She would be queen here, with her children.

The comb broke sharply in Pat's hand, and she threw the pieces into the waste-paper basket.

Time she went downstairs, she decided quickly, before she did a stupid lament over what must be endured.

The guests were scattered about Alastair's study. The

comfortable couple, the Allinsons, told Pat all about the arthritis which prevented them from driving the car.

"But Lee is going to show us round," prattled Mrs. Allinson. Elkman, solid and imperturbable through the chatter of a cocktail party as he had been through an Antarctic winter, sat by the window, while the little bearded Frenchman soon made his way to Pat's side.

"Your brother? Kent has kept me informed," said Diderot to Pat. "It is the greatest pity. He should be here. Tell me how he is, what you think."

Pat could talk freely to him while Lee lurked at her shoulder, when he could escape from his duties as assistant to Alistair.

Diderot nodded.

"You say the will is sleeping in him. Perhaps something will happen to arouse it. A change may come. Luck may change, mademoiselle."

Pat looked at him gratefully.

"Dr. Willerby said that he was trying to get a special neurologist—someone he knows."

"Ah, our good Kent. I wonder sometimes myself that he has the strength of will to carry on. He was—not quite himself during that voyage back. You know anything of his life. He is not a happy man in his life?"

The bright brown eyes above the neat beard were piercing.

"I don't know," answered Pat in confusion. "His mother—Janet—"

"And both to my mind, little—what is the word?—little nincompoops," Diderot hissed in her ear. "What possessed him to choose the same type for his wife as his mother? I need only to meet them once to know! Ah!"

He wagged his head so vigorously that Pat did not know whether to laugh or contradict, but she was saved by Kent's appearance. The group formed round him, asking questions, with laughing reminders of their shared experiences.

Janet arrived late, in palest dove-coloured nylon, with a white fur wrap across her shoulders.

"Country houses are always so cold," she shuddered at Pat. "I expect this place is like an ice-box in the winter."

"Well, you'll have to change it if you're going to live here," said Nina good-humouredly.

"Live here!" exclaimed Janet aghast. "Not my idea at all, I can tell you."

"There's no formal announcement about dinner," said Nina gaily. "But I know it's all ready. Come and get it."

Pat found herself seated by Lee at the big round table. Across a flat bowl of clematis blossom, purple and lilac and pale pink, she could see Kent beside Nina, turning to answer questions from Mrs. Allinson on his other side. Janet between Alistair and Lee, was successful in claiming the attention of both of them, for Diderot was absorbed in his meal.

Pat found herself giving a résumé of hospital life to the demanding Mr. Allinson from New Zealand who had a thirst for information.

To take coffee in the lounge afterwards was a relief. "We're going to dance in the hall," Lee said in her ear. "Let those who want to, watch the television in Alastair's study."

Kent was standing beside Nina at the coffee tray.

"I don't know how you've managed to change this

place," he said to her, looking round with appreciation. "It's completely different."

"There may be a few scratches and dents before we go," answered Nina. "But then a home has to be lived in. Oh, yes, we moved some of the furniture, and put away things which needed too much cleaning—you don't mind?"

"Nothing to do with me," he hastened to say. "My mother's department."

"Yes, she's had her own way. Men should assert themselves," said Nina blithely.

"What chance has a husband got?" asked Alastair pathetically. "You wait until you're run by a wife, Kent."

"I'm sure I shouldn't want to live out here, Kent," pouted Janet. "A flat in the centre of things is going to be so much more convenient for us."

Pat wandered away into the hall with Lee. The first record had been put on the radiogram, and they began to dance, past the foot of the wide staircase, past the flower-filled fireplace, round to the door of the lounge where the others looked out at them.

"I hoped the domestic influence of Nina might have the right effect on you," Lee murmured in Pat's ear.

"It might scare me off," Pat answered in the same tone. "Think of the joys of St. Antholin's."

"That's not the life for you," he insisted. "A place like this to come home to, if only for week-ends."

"Lee, don't. All the time I feel I'm not being fair to you—I don't want to be persuaded," she spoke half-wildly, for she felt the instinctive pull of the life he described.

A home, guest rooms for Tom and her family, perhaps children, new demands on her energy and life and love. It would be grand, but with Lee it would be second-best.

He went to dance with his countrywoman, and Pat slipped into the lounge to find the men clustered round a table with Diderot drawing diagrams which Elkman contradicted.

"They're having a lovely time," said Nina fondly. "Silly of Janet to sulk."

Indeed, Janet's face was stormy as she sat beside Kent, her hand very near his on the arm of the chair. She brightened as Lee came in and drew her away to dance.

To Pat, on the fringe of the group, there was a vivid memory of Tom at home during those week-ends before his departure, with the stub of pencil, the maps unrolled, the newspaper cuttings, the diagrams, the records. If this were technical "shop", then it was "shop" in which she could lose herself because of her love for the two men involved.

She sat with her hands clasped round her knees, her eyes bright with interest, not speaking, but following the others' words. She would save every scrap of this for Tom, Tom who ought to be here.

Then Elkman reluctantly tore himself away. He was flying to Italy that night, he could give Diderot a lift in his car on the way to London.

"Wish we could foregather like this more," said Kent with longing.

"Ah, that will depend on your wife, *mon ami*," said Diderot cheerfully.

The good-byes were said. Lee switched off the radio-

gram as they all crowded into the hall. Kent was walking down the drive to his mother's house, since he would sleep there.

Janet was standing beside Pat.

"Well, if that's Nina's idea of a lively evening, it's not mine," she said bitterly, as the car drove off, and Kent waved a hand to them. "How you could listen to that stuff, Pat, I don't know."

Lee gave Janet's shoulder a cheerful little smack.

"Pat was thinking about Tom. Going to retail it all to him. That's why I didn't disturb her—much."

It was considerate of him, Pat realized.

"Sometimes I wonder whether all her interest *is* concentrated on Tom," said Janet sharply.

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" cried Lee, but Janet was turning to the stairs.

"You won't mind if I go to bed right away, Nina, darling?" she said. "And remember, tennis in the morning, Lee."

As she went upstairs. "You don't mind, Pat, do you? Nina says he plays a very good game."

"Why on earth should I mind?" laughed Pat. "And I think it's a good idea to follow Janet."

She lingered in her own room to give Janet time to finish her toilet in the bathroom, but when at last, in her gay, cotton house-coat, she went across the corridor, Janet was emerging.

With her face scrubbed and innocent of make-up, she looked almost a child, and an unhappy child at that.

"Come in and talk to me, Pat, when you're ready," she begged. "I'm not really sleepy."

An interview with Janet was the last thing which Pat wanted, but she could hardly refuse.

Sitting on the window-sill of Janet's room overlooking the lawn, she listened to Janet's complaints of the evening. Then to her surprise came a request for news of Tom, and St. Antholin's. There was always enough gossip of the nurses' affairs; Ruth Bowman's unexpected engagement to an actor, of all people, the change of diet consequent on the arrival of a new cook, the vagaries of sisters and patients. While Pat chatted away naturally on what she knew, she could not help wondering why Janet should be so interested.

"That funny little Frenchman said Tom could get better," Janet said.

She was sitting cross-legged on the couch at the bottom of the bed.

"It's such a long time," sighed Pat.

"What about that patient of yours you talked about to Tom? What was his name - Terry something? Isn't he a similar case?" asked Janet carelessly.

"Terry Hiam?" asked Pat. "Oh, that's quite different. He's done up in plaster, and he insisted on going back to his own flat. Says that he has a neighbour who will help him. Very independent. I think it was yesterday or the day before that he went out. Sister Warrenler was right when she called him a tough nut. I suppose he's been through so many motor crashes that one more or less doesn't make all that difference to him."

Janet nodded with indifference as she bent over the careful filing of a finger-nail.

"Good old St. Antholin's," she said, almost mockingly.

Pat rose from the window-seat.

"Well, I'm off to bed. See you in the morning, Janet."

She was glad they had kept on surface topics, that she had preserved the peace between them. And again she had that odd sympathy for a girl who never seemed to reach happiness.

She was suddenly tired after the evening's events. She had been lost in the interest of the conversation, even to forgetting her love of dancing, she had had the joy of watching Kent from the background, of appreciating the good opinion in which the other men held him.

Only another day, she thought as she went into her own room. Only another day of the bitter sweetness of seeing Kent, of realizing the hold Janet must have on him.

The next morning Lee and Janet played vigorous tennis. They were well matched, for Janet was light and swift and sure. Pat, watching them, felt a small hand slipped into hers.

Monica, in shorts and striped jersey, was claiming her attention.

"You said you'd come and see Paulette," she urged.

"Of course," said Pat readily.

Lee shouted after them.

"Nina wants me to drive the Allinsons. Going now, so I may be late for lunch."

David cycled beside them to the ancient stables, now used as a garage, with small Grace on his handle-bars.

They passed between the rhododendron bushes to the brick-walled courtyard where, among rabbit hutches and kennels, they found the invalid, Paulette.

"Silly name for a dog," said David.

"She's a French poodle, and she has to have a

French name," said Monica, who was of an insistent nature. "And Mummy says Pat is a nurse and knows everything. And we asked the doctor, too."

Kent Willerby was sitting on an upturned box gravely regarding the patient. In light trousers, with an open-necked shirt, he seemed to Pat younger than she had seen him before.

Her heart beat faster at his presence.

"A professional consultation, Nurse Meriford?" he asked her. "So this persistent little monkey has roped you in too, has she? I know her of old."

"Well, you helped with the collies at home, that time you came to stay with us," said Monica sturdily. "Mummy says I don't forget anything."

"More's the pity," said David, who was carrying out complicated figures of eight on his bicycle.

Grace, the youngest, sat down to make a mud pie.

Kent held the invalid Paulette's paw as gravely as if she were a patient at St. Antholin's, and Pat could not help smiling at him.

She was wearing a deep blue dress with a flaring white collar which stood away from her sunburned throat.

Now she knelt down beside the pathetic poodle.

"A little less food, plenty of water to drink, and no fussing by the patient's relatives will put our friend Paulette to rights," he announced. "I don't think you'll need to bandage her, will you, Nurse?"

"I don't think so. Doctor," Pat answered, trying to meet his gravity with a professional manner.

"You did the colic good, so I suppose you know what you're talking about," said Monica.

She turned to Pat.

"You'll see the collies when you marry Lee and go to New Zealand," she said.

The children were far too modern to give the titles of uncle and aunt to their relations.

"What did you say?" asked Pat in surprise.

She was annoyed, she felt awkward. The thought of attentions of Lee, the generous warmth of Nina, suffocated her. To her independent nature, inherited from the difficult Captain Merriford, the knowledge that she had been taken for granted by the Gauntley family and discussed as far away as New Zealand, made for a flash of anger. She felt the colour rise to her face. Even her hair seemed to brighten as she rose from her kneeling position beside the poodle's box.

"I don't know where on earth you got that idea that I'm going to marry Lee, but it isn't true," she said vigorously. "I like him very much, and we're great friends, but if you want to know, I've never said that I'm going to marry him."

"But Janet told us. She told Mummy. She told us all. And Mummy had the letters from Lee."

The saucer eyes of the child were not unlike the round eyes of the poodle.

"And I am to be bridesmaid. I always wanted to be a bridesmaid."

"Silly thing to be," said her brother, turning skilfully just as the cycle reached the brick wall.

"Janet told us all you would marry Lee," repeated Monica. "I don't forget things, do I, Doctor?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Pat rose from bending over the poodle. The hem of her deep blue skirt might be dusty now.

She wanted to escape, to get away blindly from the childish voice going on, with maddening insistence.

It was Janet who had confirmed that report of her engagement to Lee, whether truthfully or out of mischief she did not know.

"But I do remember," Monica went on. "Because I was going to the dentist that morning, and the doctor went with me. You bought me a box of chocolates, didn't you? Such a pretty box, too, with silver ribbon. I have the ribbon now."

"Just like a girl," scoffed her brother.

"And you said I had to be a brave girl, and everybody had a pain sometimes. And I asked if you had a pain too, and you said 'yes'."

Righteous justification flowed on in Monica's voice.

"And Great-grandfather has a heart, sometimes we have to be quiet because of his heart, and I asked if it was a pain in your heart—"

"The nonsense this child talks," said Kent, and there was a change in his tone which disturbed Pat beyond all reason.

He rested his hand on the child's head lightly.

Pat thought she must get away, escape from this tor-

ment of confusion. This news was too bitter, this misunderstanding was cleared up too late.

The child's words gave such a different picture from her imagination.

There was a commotion at the stable door. Small Grace, uninterested in the conversation, had been making a satisfactory mud pie. Her brother cycled round it, she defended it, the bicycle wheel touched her, her brother fell and grazed her knee, and there were loud cries of complaint and justification.

"Back to the house, all of you," said Kent, with unusual briskness. "Off you go, Monica, David—"

Pat had turned and fled down the path between the rhododendron bushes. She was moving blindly away, anywhere, across the lawn, down that dip to the stream where Nina had brought her only yesterday. The tiny plank bridge led across to a patch of woodland, grateful in this heat. She felt she wanted to hide, to cry out her anger, her bitterness at the realizations which were crowding in on her.

She had come here on false pretences. It was nothing to do with any of these people whom she did not marry and whom she married. Yet half of it was her own fault.

Janet had lied, from intention, from mischief, perhaps had taken a mischievous delight in catching Kent's interest.

Pat saw her future as a nurse, dealing always with people who needed her. She would probably grow gaunt and thin like Sister Cunningham who was an institution. Her hair would turn sandy, and she would be old and wrinkled.

All because the man she loved was going to marry another girl.

She was on the bridge when she heard footsteps behind her. On the grass rubber-soled shoes had been noiseless, and she had been moving at such an angry speed that she had not waited to look round. Now at the sound of the footsteps on the gravel she swung back to see Kent Willerby behind her.

"I didn't call to you," he said. "But don't run away altogether, Pat. I want to talk to you."

She wanted to vent her bitterness on someone.

"There's no reason—" she began.

"There's every reason in the world," he said firmly. "I know your temper. Pat. Will you listen to me? I must talk to you. There's something which must be said."

Pat was limp now that her anger was fading from her. She leaned her elbows on the slender rail of the bridge and looked down at the tiny stream, at the play of water in the sun, the dimple of the freshets, in the shadow of a great willow tree.

At the urgency in his tone she looked up at him. He was standing beside her on the little bridge.

"When I left England last year," he said quietly. "There was only one thing which held me back from asking a girl to marry me. I had set myself to a certain ambition. It had been my dream since I was a boy, nothing was to hold me back, even the sweetest experience which had come my way. Besides, who was to know that I would come back?"

Pat drew a sharp breath.

"We went on a private war of our own. We might not come back. I had to think of the girl. We did get back, we were made welcome, and what was the first thing I heard when I was invited to stay at Nina's? That you were going to marry Lee Gauntley, that you were

secretly engaged to him. Well, perhaps not much of a secret except outside his family, because you had to finish your training. You have no idea what a blow that was to me."

Pat clutched at the slender birch rail of the little bridge until her hands ached. She was gazing at him in utter surprise. Then her lower lip trembled.

"But—but—Janet—" she began, trying to sort out her world, her world swinging upside down since that episode at the stables.

"Janet! Yes, that's when Janet came into it, when she was gay and sympathetic, a woman to admire and to play with after that long lonely time. I suppose I was a bit crazy then, I'd missed the best, I could take the second-best. That's how it was, Pat. And I love you with all my heart."

Pat loosed her hands from the rail almost with an effort. She seemed to have no power over them now. They went out instinctively with a lovely gesture of welcome to the man she could not help loving.

"Oh, darling," she said with a little sob in her throat. "And all the time I thought you'd forgotten."

She was in his arms, held closely, firmly.

"Pat," he cried, and she thought that never had her name sounded so bright and lovely. "Pat, you did know what I meant that evening before I went away? I didn't dare say any more. I'd made up my mind. I could hardly tear myself away from you, but I wouldn't let myself say more, darling."

He was holding her away from him to smile down at her, then he drew her close again and she felt the rapture of his lips on hers.

A bird sang clearly from the woodland ahead of

them. The scent of meadowsweet rose in heavy fragrance from the banks of the stream.

"We can't deal with all this properly out here on a bridge over a stream, Pat. Come along," said Kent.

Pat hardly knew what she was doing, walking beside him, clinging to him along the woodland shadowed path.

"But how was I to know?" she stormed at him suddenly with a touch of the old impatient Pat. "You said nothing, you didn't write. It was all your fault. Sometimes I thought I must have dreamed it all."

"This is what I dreamed of," he whispered, kissing her now with a passion all the greater for the restraint of the past.

"But how could I know?" Pat tried to argue, half-laughing between those kisses. "There I was, the stupidest girl in St. Anthony's —"

"Never stupid," he said ardently. "You just rushed at everything, that's why you made mistakes. And you rushed into my heart as if you belonged there, as if I'd been waiting for you all my life."

He laid a gentle hand on her bright hair, and she rested her head contentedly on his shoulder.

"All the dreadful things I did, mixing things up, and you thought so badly of me —"

"Did I?"

That stern expression had changed with the gladness in his eyes.

"I'll tell you when I did think badly of you, when I saw you kissing that second string of yours through the old buttery window. You were wearing a green dress, and you were leaning out and kissing him good night. That should have warned me not to fall in love with a flirtatious red-head, but it didn't make any difference."

Pat gave a cosy little chuckle.

"You do say the nicest things, Kent. Kent, I never thought I should call you that. And did you really mind—I mean, about Lee?"

"Only envied him. But those few times we talked—"

"I remember each time," Pat nodded.

"It was as if each time mattered more. And you looked, I can't tell how you looked—as if I did count with you. As if there was so much for each of us to tell the other—when the time came."

"That's why you noticed my lantern burning that Christmas morning," said Pat. "How wonderfully quick you were. And your poor hands."

"I was furious with your carelessness," he said. "To endanger your dear self in your usual impulsiveness. Pat, you need a darn lot of taking care of."

Pat sighed with happiness. Then she started.

"But Janet—there's Janet to think of—"

"Oh, Lord, why was I such a fool as to get engaged to Janet?"

He groaned.

"I'll get hold of her when we go back, I must tell her the truth. Can't possibly go on like this. Pat, do you realize that if those children hadn't talked like that this morning, I might never have known the truth?"

Pat considered.

"You really would have gone on and married Janet?" she asked him gravely.

"When we landed after the expedition, I was on the top of the world, hungry for all the life I'd missed. The blow fell. I turned to the nearest girl for consolation. It's as simple as that. And she helped me through a bad patch."

"Yes, I can understand that," Pat said. "And all because you were too proud, too—too set in your ways to tell me before you went away. Kent Willerby, don't you ever do that again!"

"Darling," he said.

They had wandered along the path until they reached the trunk of an old beech tree.

"Besides," he went on as he pulled her down to sit beside him on the trunk. "How do you think I felt when the accident happened to Tom? I shall always blame myself. I'd let myself get furious over trifles during the last days of the voyage. I wouldn't fly back as Janet wanted me to do. And Tom talked of you and your family. I was sick of the whole situation then. I shall always think that my own clumsiness in hurrying with that case of instruments, the bad mood I was in, helped. And to see you then, to know what suffering I had brought on you all. I was cut off from you by so much, and I loved you so."

Pat clung to him.

"I never meant the angry things I said," she began. "At least I felt them for a moment. But you suffered so, and I couldn't do anything about it. And I thought you'd forgotten. And Janet was so pleased with herself. Oh, Kent, I should feel dreadful about your engagement now, but it seems to make no difference at all."

"I'll see Janet the minute we get back," he told her.

"Do you think Tom will really get better?" she went on. "I can tell you now, he was in love with Janet himself. At least, he fancied it for a time, he met her at that party before you set off, and then when you were at Christchurch, he thought he had some chance but you

were there. Anyway, she's Westbrow's daughter, what could poor Tom do?"

"So no wonder he hated the sight of me," exclaimed Kent. "Half-killed him and took his girl. But there's my pal, the American neurologist, I wanted to see Tom. Other things we might try. I'll never give up hope."

Pat had to kiss him again for that. She had never been as happy in her life as now, sitting on an old beech log in the woodland with Kent's arm round her waist, lost in a rapture of happiness.

A bird fluted sleepily through the green branches above them. The bracken curled its tall fronds, and sent out its own flavour of summer. They could hear the faintest tinkle from the little stream.

At last Pat moved to tidy her hair.

"Whatever is the time?" she asked practically.

"There's no clock i' the forest," he quoted.

"I didn't know you went in for Shakespearian quotations, Dr. Willerby," she said gaily.

"A great deal you don't know about me. Can you stand it, Pat?"

"I'll try," she said with shining eyes.

"When I saw you sitting there last night, when we were all yarning awav about the expedition, and I remembered your photograph was on the wall above Tom's bunk- how I used to long for you. I've a confession to make, Pat."

She nodded.

"Yes, I know who stole Tom's picture of me!"

"How did you know? It was an accident, it fell down among some papers when we were clearing the hut, and I—I couldn't bring myself to give it back to

him. He didn't need it like I did. But who told you, Pat?"

"Your admirer, Mrs. Brierley. And she says you may be tidy in the hospital, but you're not tidy at home," she teased.

"Old Brierley? She's been a good pal to me. Good heavens, Pat. Do you know the time? It's half-past two! Long past lunch-time."

"I did feel hungry, but I didn't like to mention it," Pat said demurely. "Oh, Kent, what are we going to do? We can't go back now. I couldn't face the others. And what are you going to say?"

They had returned from the strange country of their new happiness to the needs of every day.

"What can we do?" repeated Pat. "Whatever will Nina think? And there's Lee and Janet —".

"Your friend Lee said he was to drive the Allinsons round the countryside—Nina's instructions," Kent pointed out. "Pat, my dear, are you sure you didn't want him?"

Pat was standing up, she swung round on him.

"I tried, I tried," she said breathlessly. "At first it was fun, like that time climbing through the window. Oh, I suppose I've been unkind to him. He said he'd be content to be friends for a while, but--but—it's not like this."

"Would you be happier with him?" he asked with a jealousy which was suddenly sweet to her. "The times I've seen you with him—I knew I had no right—but it was hell for me."

Pat drew away from him and clapped her hands.

"I'm glad, I'm glad you were unhappy too," she cried mischievously. Then she put her head on his

shoulder and whispered: "It means that we've both got to be very nice to each other in the future to make up for all this. And, darling, I'm terribly hungry."

"Better not go back," said Kent decidedly. "I'll tell you what we can do. We can go down to the lodge where my mother lives. She'll be having her afternoon siesta, but if Mrs. Brierley is there, she'll find us something cold, I've no doubt. I'll phone from there, make some excuse. For two pins, Pat, I'd run off with you now."

It was wonderful to hear those words. Pat felt as if she had emerged from darkness into a dazzling sunshine.

"Whatever will the others think?" she asked, coming back to the ordinary world with a sense of unreality. "Nina will wonder what has happened to us. Don't you think we ought to go back to the house?"

"No," he asserted. "If we follow the stream through the wood, we can get into the back garden of the Lodge. Pat, how can we possibly go back to the others until I've seen Janet, until I've told her, made it clear to her? I can't feel right about this until I've seen her."

It was sweet to yield to his wishes. They wandered on through the wood, crossed the stream lower down, and were immediately beside a gate leading into a cottage garden, where rows of runner beans climbed the brick wall which divided the Lodge premises from the main garden. A stout figure was sitting on a stool among the currant bushes, picking busily.

"Mrs. Brierley," called Kent

Round came a rosy face.

"Birds'll have all these currants if I don't get 'em first," she said unperturbed. "Sunday and all."

"I've brought a visitor back for lunch," Kent said. "But you don't need to come in."

"There's the cold bird in the larder, the raspberries and the ~~junket~~— Nay, I'll come in."

Mrs. Brierley put down her bowl of currants, and nodded to Pat.

"He'd never find it the way I put it," she said. "And Madam's having her rest until tea-time."

"Is it any good arguing with you?" teased Kent, and Pat was surprised and happy at the lightness of his tone.

Mrs. Brierley glanced from him to Pat.

"You look after your job, and I'll look after mine," she answered amicably.

She ambled into the house more quickly than her broad build suggested. In a very short time she had laid out cold chicken, salad and a bowl of fruit and cream, on a table in the window of a small breakfast room.

She looked at Pat almost with the air of a conspirator.

"Put you in here," she said. "Madam's at the other side of the house."

"Is that a warning?" said Kent, patting her stout shoulder.

"If you go laughing like that you'll wake her. Does me good to hear you laugh like that."

She nodded to Pat.

"If he wants any more, you'll know where it is," she said. "Never was such a boy for second helpings."

She vanished. Pat laughed with Kent.

"Did you see the odd look she gave me? What can she imagine? And you should ring Nina."

"Afterwards, not until afterwards," he begged. "It's a day in a million years."

It was a happy meal in the little breakfast room. There were so many questions and answers, so many memories to be sorted out, to be laughed over, to be apologized for, to be understood.

"Kent, you must telephone," Pat insisted at last. "I don't know what Nina is going to say. We've been terribly rude going off like this. What will you say to her?"

"I shall say that I was called away to an urgent engagement," he replied. "Isn't that true?"

"I wonder if the children said anything," Pat reflected. "Oh, we do look a couple of fools. And what are you going to say to Janet? It's horrid for her, and she'll hate me more than ever."

Kent's expression changed.

"I told her when I proposed to her that there was someone of whom I had been very fond, but it had all gone wrong—she knew that much."

"She knew that?" gasped Pat. "She didn't know, but she must have guessed. She—once I thought I gave myself away about you. Janet is a strange girl, Kent. Someone else said that she always wanted what she couldn't have. No wonder she's disliked me."

Kent went into the hall to the telephone.

Pat stood beside him while he spoke.

"Nina, is that you? I want to apologize to you—something rather unusual—something came up—"

He had stopped, was listening intently.

"What is that you say? With Janet? No, Janet isn't here. I'm at the Lodge with my mother. What did you say about Janet? Good heavens, no. I'll come up to the house immediately. You say her car has gone? I'll be there."

He turned to look at the mystified Pat.

"Janet isn't there. She didn't come in to lunch. Nina thought I was with her. Lee phoned that the Allinsons had met some friends, and they'd all be back later. He was fed up with the arrangement, but said that he'd get home as soon as he could."

In the dimness of the little hall, not much more than a passage, with the streaks of sunlight falling through the breakfast-room door across the floor, Pat had paled. She clutched at Kent's arm.

"Janet has gone? Oh, what do you think has happened to her? Kent, do you think she knew—about us? What can have happened to her?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

WE'D better go up to the house and get to the bottom of this," said Kent. "Janet had her own car. It's odd for her to behave in this way."

Pat clasped her hands together and tried to keep calm.

"I'm afraid," she said, in a low voice. "If she saw us together, if the children said something — She is of a jealous nature. She must feel terribly unhappy."

Kent did not answer her.

"I'm just going to have a word with my mother, to explain our visit, and to tell her the news," he said. "You know, she's an odd little creature, she's never grown up, I say, but I wouldn't want to hurt her feelings. Perhaps I understand her better than I used to when I was a boy."

Pat nodded.

"I'll wait for you here," she said. "Kent, I shan't feel happy until we know where Janet has gone."

It was not many moments before he came down again.

"I said I might be late back this evening, that's all," he told her as he piloted her through the door, across the garden to the small ironwork gate which led into the main drive.

Nina was on the telephone when they entered the hall.

She put down the receiver as she saw them.

"For a minute I thought it might be Janet," she said. "I was speaking to the Careys, the friends of the Allinsons. Lee should get them out here in about half an hour. I know the boy was fed up at not getting back for you, Pat, but poor old Allinson can't drive, and his wife is so disappointed at not seeing all the country churches she wants. I just wondered if Janet had gone after them."

"But what happened?" asked Kent.

They went into the lounge, the long room stretching from the front to the back of the house, the windows overlooking the lawn. Nina's kind face was crinkled with anxiety. She did not seem to attach any importance to the arrival of Pat and Kent together.

"You know how it's been today, everyone going and coming, Lee off with the Allinsons, and when you and Janet didn't come into lunch, I just thought something had come up. Perhaps you'd been detained at your mother's. Janet came flying down the stairs to me, just when I was doing the flowers before lunch, and she said she'd had an urgent telephone call, and she must go off straight away to London. And I said what about you, Kent? And how would she go? And wouldn't she wait until later, then you or Lee could drive her back. But she said 'no'. Of course, she'd got her own car. I can't understand it."

Pat wanted to look at Kent. The effort to restrain the natural instinctive consultation with him hurt her. Had something revealed the truth to Janet? Could she have seen Kent with her? She felt guilty.

"I'll get on the phone to her mother," said Kent slowly. "Perhaps there's something wrong there."

"Yes, do," said Nina.

Pat longed for her to go. The need to talk to Kent was so urgent, so vital, but Nina lingered.

"I think she's been jumpy all the time she's been here," she said. "You haven't quarrelled, have you, Kent? Girls get all sorts of strange ideas in their heads just before they get married."

"No, we hadn't quarrelled," said Kent, turning from the telephone.

Pat waited in the doorway, she could not bring herself to go away from him. She heard Kent ask the operator for the number, she could hear the ringing sound.

From the doorway she could look through the long windows.

Over the garden was the sunny peacefulness of a Sunday afternoon. She could see Alastair extended in a long chair, a newspaper over his face. She could see the tiny figures of the children far away at the end by the shallow stream, the little figure of Monica in her scarlet bathing costume jumping with ecstasy.

Pat was convinced now that Kent's fiancée must have noticed them talking, must have seen them on the bridge. She felt a queer mixture of anger and sympathy and guilt. If only Janet had been here for Kent's explanation, for his appeal to her.

And Janet, her mother had said it herself, was a spoilt child, had always had what she wanted, had accustomed herself to circumvent her father's decisions for her own wishes.

Those precious hours with Kent seemed like a far-away dream now, she felt disturbed and anxious.

Kent was asking questions on the telephone.

Nina strolled over to Pat.

"Don't they all look happy?" she asked Pat, with a smile at the scene on the lawn. "I can't tell you how I've been enjoying it all here—until this upset. If Janet has taken the huff about something, it's a silly way to behave. Can you think of anything which would send her off like this?"

Pat was saved from answering the awkward question by Kent turning round to say: "Janet isn't at the Westbrows' flat in Kensington. Mrs. Westbrow is out, there's only the housekeeper there, and she thought Janet was returning tomorrow, as arranged."

"But what can have happened to send her off at a tangent like that?" exclaimed Nina in vexation. "Really, the girl might have had more sense, if only a little bit of consideration for me—and for you, too, Kent."

"How did she seem?" he asked. "I mean, when she spoke to you? Was she upset about something?"

Pat's heart leapt at his words. He had the same fear as herself, and she had a sudden joy in their sharing of this emotion.

Nina considered.

"Not exactly upset, excited, perhaps. As if she'd made up her mind about something. But I didn't really take very much notice then. I feel a bit worried about the girl, and I'm sure you do, too, Kent. I must go and tell Alastair."

She went through the long window across the lawn, unceremoniously removed the newspaper from her husband's face, and obviously began to tell him the story.

"Oh, what can we do?" cried Pat, conscious of the exquisite freedom of being alone with Kent at last.

"Did she know? Did she guess? I feel terrible about this."

"Don't worry, darling. I wouldn't want Janet to get the wrong idea. I'll 'phone her mother when she comes back this evening. The housekeeper said she would be back about six. Now forget it."

He put his hand out to give her a reassuring touch on the shoulder, a touch which lingered. Pat looked at him.

"If she's hurt, if she's run away from this trouble as she's done from other troubles, she'll be so unhappy. Oh, Kent, why do things have to happen like this?"

He smiled.

"We shall clear this up between us," he said, and his confidence soothed her.

Nina returned, her husband following her while he stifled his yawns.

"Alastair says she couldn't have had a telephone call because he was on the line himself, on and off, with getting the Careys and making the arrangements, and then another call about some people coming next weekend. He doesn't think Janet had a call at all."

"I don't see why you're making all this fuss," said Alastair comfortably. "The girl took the huff about something or other — "

To Pat's excited fancy he gave her a swift glance which might have held some meaning in it, and went on: "Probably thought she'd take a run in the car. May have lost her way. She'll turn up."

"But suppose she's had an accident, she might be in hospital, anything might have happened——" cried Nina.

"Oh, don't," said Pat involuntarily.

"Then we shall hear soon enough," said her husband blandly.

"Darling, you're absolutely no use in a crisis," said Nina. "I'm going to ring the police."

When she had finished her long, involved conversation with the apparently imperturbable officer at the other end of the telephone she was flushed and disturbed.

"At least they have the number of the car, and will let us know any news," he said. "But really, you'd think girls run off every day."

"And don't they?" said Mairi, who was yawning again. "I'm about having tea a bit early, my dear?"

It was a strange afternoon to Pat, with the surface peacefulness and that undercurrent of anxiety. She played vigorous tennis, she swam with the children, she tried to keep a distance between herself and Kent. At times she was conscious that Nina's husband looked at her curiously, for she knew she was more gay than she had been on the previous afternoon. In spite of the anxiety about Janet, she had the warm consciousness of Kent's love, the thrilling knowledge that he cared for her. In spite of herself her voice had a different lightness of note, the way she walked and ran was vital, even her hair seemed to be of a brighter colour.

Lee returned with his car-load of the Allinsons. While they went upstairs to wash and refresh themselves, he made straight for Pat and flung himself into the deck-chair beside her.

"Too many old churches in this part of the country for me," he said in disgust. "Mrs. Allinson wanted to see them all. My week-end with you spoilt. And now, if

you please, Willerby wants me to drive him back to town early because of all this fuss about Janet."

"It is rather strange and worrying," Pat answered. Kent came out of the house towards them."

"I've got Mrs. Westbrow on the phone this time," he said. "She doesn't seem very upset about it. Said Janet may have changed her mind about staying on, that she did things like this sometimes."

His voice sounded puzzled.

"Ah, you'll have to get used to the vagaries of women," said Alastair in warning. "Sorry to lose you so early, Kent, but if you feel you must get to her people, can't stop you."

"Without my own car it's a bit of a nuisance," Kent said. "Janet drove me down in hers."

"Lee will be delighted to take you back," Alastair said with a quiet firmness which astonished Pat. "The Allinsons have a car coming for them early tomorrow morning, and have offered to give you a lift, Pat, to get you into the hospital in time. Will that suit you?"

"Why, yes," stammered the girl, seeing in this rearrangement of the party no chance to be with Kent again.

She realized that Alastair Champerdown, like his wife, was capable of organization when he chose.

"Spoilt week-end," Lee moaned in her ear. "I hope you'll mark it up to me that I'm an easy-tempered chap, even when his best plans go wrong. Shan't see you until tomorrow now."

"It's Janet that I'm bothered about," said Pat absently.

"Bet she's enjoying the sensation she's made," he answered. "Till tomorrow, Pat."

They were all out on the drive waiting for Kent. When he came out he said to Pat quietly: "Just had a word on the phone with my mother. And you do understand that I must see the Westbrows, don't you?"

"Of course," Pat smiled at him with gladness.

The house seemed quiet now that the two men had gone, Mrs. Allinson described in detail the architecture of the churches she had visited. From upstairs came the usual sound of childish protest at bedtime.

When they had finished the cold supper, Pat helped Nina to clear away, since Mrs. Brierley was on duty at the Lodge on Sundays. Nina did not lament the domestic situation, staff problems were here in this country as in her own. Then they went to Alastair's study, to find the rest of the party absorbed in the television programme.

Pat was glad of the dimness, the figures on the screen meant little to her, for there was so much on her mind.

She recovered herself with a start at the close of the programme to find Nina gently shaking her husband.

"How you do sleep!" she reproved him. "Say good night to Mrs. Allinson. Then I want to talk."

Pat was at the door, ready to follow the elder woman to bed.

"We've heard nothing about Janet. It's so strange. I'm glad Kent went after her. Where could she have gone if she didn't go home? Maybe a fit of nerves."

"More like a fit of temper, my dear," said her husband peaceably. "She doesn't strike me as an easy person to handle, and Kent is a busy doctor, with claims on him, leading a full life. If a woman doesn't

fit in, she can't be any good to him. Don't you think so, Miss Merriford?"

Although Nina used the familiar name of Pat, he was old-fashioned enough to stick to surnames.

Pat started at his words.

"Well, I don't know. I suppose so," she answered confusedly.

There was something in those quiet, shrewd eyes which embarrassed her.

She went to her own room, and when she had packed her case for the early start next morning, she had to sit at her window for a time to sort out the events of the day. The scent of the honeysuckle which grew over this wall at the end of the house came in richly in the summer darkness, but it was not as sweet to her as the memory of the meadowweet which would for ever be associated with the memory of Kent's words of love, the discovery of his thoughts, the realization of what life could be with him.

She thought of Tom, and Kent's new plan, she felt she understood her mother's love, her father even with his explosive temper. With Kent she felt she could face anything in the world, if only Tom were on the way back to health.

She had thought that she would not be able to sleep with so much crowding her mind, but she awoke fresh and hopeful after this strange, eventful week-end.

Breakfast was served with speed. The Allinsons were anxious to get off on their further exploration of England, and they approved of Pat's readiness to start at once.

"I'm sorry I've neglected you so," said Nina, kissing her vigorously. "I wanted so much to get to know you.

Better luck next time, when Lee brings you down again."

"It was very good of you to have me, and I've enjoyed it," said Pat truthfully.

Mrs. Allinson slept unashamedly in the comfortable hired car, while her husband read one newspaper after another.

"Nothing about this girl," he said at last. "I wondered if she'd hit something, and was lying on the road somewhere."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Pat. "And the police would have let Nina know. I do feel puzzled. I've been trying to think where in the world she would run to."

"Not the girl to go by herself," said Mrs. Allinson drowsily. "She'd go to a sympathetic friend."

"Yes, but where?" asked Pat, recalling Janet's gay life.

Now the car was threading its way through the early-morning city traffic.

"Such an odd place to have a hospital," observed Mrs. Allinson.

Pat smiled as she collected her case, the huge bunch of flowers from the children, and said her good-byes.

"The hospital has been here a long time," she said.

She changed into her uniform quickly and went down to her ward. Here she was again where she belonged, and at once work enveloped her. There were new patients coming in. It was when she was making up the bed which had been occupied by the gaunt young racing motorist that the Junior said suddenly: "Such a funny thing happened yesterday. Someone rang up Terry Hiam."

"Rang up for him? But he's gone, he went out on Friday, or was it Saturday?" said Pat. "We must hurry over this."

"Yes, so I said he'd gone to his home when she wanted to know where he was. I knew the address because I was with Sister when she saw him off."

"Do you mean you gave the address over the telephone? What about the regulations?" asked Pat reprovingly.

"Oh, I didn't give the address," said the Juuior with conscious virtue. "Only when she asked if he'd gone back to Haywoth Mansions, I said yes. Such a pretty voice the girl had. She seemed sort of breathless and excited."

Pat went on with her work. Beneath it all lay the thrilling memory of those hours with Kent, the delicious hope of seeing him again.

In the few minutes she had after lunch she went to see Tom.

She was surprised at the change in him. His eyes were not lack-lustre, the very way in which he held his head was different.

For the first time for many weeks she saw the old gleam of fun in his eyes.

"Sister says you had Dr. Willerby here," she said.

He nodded without the old resentment.

"Brought some new chap with him- largest pair of horn-rimmed glasses I've ever seen- but what do you think?" he continued, and there was almost a chuckle in his voice. "I've had such a wigging from that little friend of yours, Ann, that I thought I could have got up cradle and cage and all and hit her."

"Ann?" Pat exclaimed in astonishment. "But she's

the quietest little thing. No one could ever quarrel with her."

"Quiet?" said Tom. "She may look like a little brown sparrow, but she went for me like a raging—raging lion. She said that I had the damned impudence to behave as if I were the only patient, that I might be a hero in the snow or ice, but that it was much more difficult to live an ordinary life. You should have heard her! And all in that quiet little voice while she was manipulating this leg, and talking about the exercises. Never had such a shock in my life! Wouldn't have thought she had it in her."

There was a grudging admiration in his voice which made Pat look at him more closely. The double blows which Tom had received of the accident and the loss of Janet, the bitterness of his resentment against life, had been counterbalanced by an attack on his pride from a totally unexpected direction.

She told him the news about Janet, and he too was puzzled. Pat watched him closely.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told you. I didn't want to worry you," she said.

He turned his head towards her now.

"There's one thing I woke up to when Janet came here to see me," he said quietly. "I've had time to think, and do a bit of comparing. All very well when a chap comes back from the wilds to settle on Janet, but you need a bit more than that for everyday life. There's a lot to learn about people in hospital."

It was an admission from the quiet Tom.

Pat would not let him see the amusement in her eyes. He had seen Ann at work for months, and had not appreciated her until after the arrival of Janet.

Ann, dear Ann, you're doing him good, thought Pat.

She was going off duty when she had a telephone call from Kent. She had schooled herself to wait with patience until tomorrow.

"Yes?" she said breathlessly. "Is there any news of Janet?"

"No, nothing," he answered. "Pat, how about meeting me as soon as you can? I should be free here in half an hour. I wanted to go along to Mrs. Westbrow, but there's no reason why you shouldn't come as well. Apparently Janet's father is still away, and Mrs. Westbrow doesn't seem the kind of woman who will act without him."

"There's been no accident reported?" asked Pat.

"Nothing at all."

"Janet would be doing what she wanted to do. If we could only find her —"

"I'll pick you up at that little coffee place just off Park Lane. You know it? Just round the corner from the hotel where we had the farewell party. You'll wait for me if I'm late?"

At the anxiety in his voice Pat laughed.

"I'll wait," she promised, and heard his breathed "Darling" before he rang off.

She had a clean white collar to slip into the deep blue frock, a scrap of a white hat which hardly hid her hair, white gloves to match her tiny handbag.

As she was going down the steep nurses' staircase one of the girls called: "Telephone for Meiriford. Pat, are you there?"

She had to hurry back to the staff telephone.

"Wondered if I should get you in time," said Lee's laughing voice. "About our date for tonight. I'm wait-

ing at the door with my chariot to make up for my lost week-end."

"Lee!" she exclaimed.

"Don't 'say you've forgotten me! Anyway, come along, if only for half an hour."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PAT hesitated.

"Yes, I'll see you," she promised.

She must tell him her news.

The thought of the explanations which she must make to Lee had taken the edge off the anticipation of meeting Kent. She went down the stairs soberly, through the corridors, along to the main door to find him waiting for her in Nina's new car.

"And you look like the cat's whiskers," he greeted her jubilantly before the jaundiced eye of old Dincross the porter, who had seen so many young men meet young women here that he hardly raised his eyes from his evening paper. "And where can I take you, madam?"

"Lee, I've got something to say to you, something I've got to apologize about," Pat said as she stepped into the car.

"Forgiven in advance. Poisoned the porridge or mixed up the specimens?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. Lee, you've always been so kind and nice to me, we've been great friends. Lee, I'm in love—I love someone else, and we're going to--I mean, I think so. And I know I haven't treated you fairly—"

She felt that she was floundering along. Lee drew the car to a standstill in the quiet square before he turned into the main stream of traffic.

"I took the risk of that, Pat," he said after a moment's careful study of her. "I had to chance it. But are you sure? I mean, who's the chap? I hadn't any idea. I say, Pat, don't look as if I'm going to beat you. I want you to be happy, but who the heck is it?"

He was holding her hand, pressing it tightly with his other hand as if to reassure her.

"It's—Kent. Dr. Willerby. You see, we only found it out yesterday, his engagement was all a mistake. And he has to see Janet to explain, but she's gone. We don't know where. That's the worrying part about it, Lee, I'm sorry if I've hurt you."

The young man gave a long, low whistle.

"So he's the one! But bless my soul, Pat, you've not seen as much of him as you have of me. How can you tell?"

Pat remembered Tom's words.

"You don't need all that time to fall in love," she said gently. "And I'm to meet him this evening, and we're going to Mrs. Westbrow's about Janet. I feel terrible about her."

Her eyes were pleading.

Lee looked as if he were digesting something painful.

"So that's it," he said at last. "Week-end wasted, girl lost for ever, what a life!"

Pat sat there patiently beside him. Silence was an unusual thing for the cheerful Lee. At last he said: "Well, I suppose I'd better drive you there, and hand you over to him, eh?"

"That's very sweet of you."

"Not at all," said Lee gloomily. "Do I get a kiss if I come to dance at your wedding?"

"Oh, Lee, you're incorrigible," Pat laughed, and

kissed him first with gaiety. "You'll bring a pretty girl if you do come to such an occasion, and wonder what you saw in me!"

"I'll not forget," he said in a low voice.

Then he started the car briskly.

"It's the thought of Janet that worries me," Pat confided as they progressed slowly between buses and cars.

"Don't worry about her. Gone off with another bloke just to spite Kent, I shouldn't wonder."

"I was just afraid that she had seen us together, and —and that made her run away," Pat said in a low voice.

Lee gave a low whistle.

"So that was it! It would have been more like Janet to stay and have a scene, I should say. Wasn't there some chap she could have gone off with?"

"Poor Tom was in love with her, but he couldn't run away with her," said Pat.

"But at one time she was very keen on motor racing. She talked to me about someone she'd known. You remember, when I used to take her out. Can't remember the man's name. Well known."

A new and surprising thought struck Pat. She clutched at Lee's arm.

"Hey, don't do that just when I'm overtaking."

"Was it Hiam, Terry Hiam?"

Odd little memories were returning to her, Janet's unexpected visit to Terry Hiam in the hospital, the turn of the conversation in Janet's bedroom the night before last, the report of the Junior about the telephone inquiry.

"Yes, that's it. Daring kind of bloke, I believe. Quite a lad in his way."

"Lee, couldn't we stop and look in a telephone

directory for his address? Something Hayworth Mansions. I have an instinct about it."

"Then you can just restrain your feminine intuition until I land you at the meeting-place with your beloved. How the dickens could I stop in this traffic?"

"Sorry," said Pat, but her mind was racing.

She was suddenly sure that she was right.

At the meeting-place Kent was pacing the pavement, as if he could not relax inside the little coffee-house.

"Kent," Pat leapt out in her usual impulsive way. "I'm so sorry to be late, but I was delayed. And Lee thinks perhaps Terry Hliam may know something about Janet."

Kent was surprised, amused, then questioning. Lee stepped out and went to him, holding out his hand.

"Pat's done me the honour of telling me her news. Congratulations, sir. Lucky man."

"Thank you," said Kent.

"It's the telephone directory I want," said Pat earnestly. "Just to see if Terry Hliam does live at Hayworth Mansions. Then—then—"

"I'll say good-bye," said Lee. "Hope you can sort it all out. I'm off to drown my sorrows."

"Not too deeply, I hope," cried Pat.

"Always knew there was the touch of the managing woman in you," he said in his usual manner. "Just as well to escape!"

When he had gone, Kent turned to Pat and said: "What about this coffee then?"

"Oh, no, you must speak to Mrs. Westbrow about this idea of mine."

She told him of the string of small incidents.

"Could we go there, or telephone? I couldn't rest until we know about Janet."

"She hasn't spared much thought about anyone else, has she?" he reminded her.

There was a telephone box at the corner, and Kent went into it.

"There's room in here for you," he told her mischievously, and put out a caressing hand.

"Hush, people the other end will hear you," whispered Pat.

She heard the ringing tone of the telephone, then the voice of the housekeeper, at last Mrs. Westbrow's careful accents.

"Yes? Is that you, Kent? Oh, I thought from your voice that you had had a message, you sounded so different. I don't know what to do. Her father won't be back until tonight, and I can't get in touch with him."

"This is rather an odd thing to say, but—is there anyone she might have gone to see? Did she know someone called Terry Hiam?"

There was an exclamation at the other end of the telephone.

"Oh, dear, no. The naughty girl! That would be just like her. Her father wouldn't hear of it, you know. No, I can't believe that."

There was a slight pause, then Kent said gently: "How about you coming with me—with us—to see if this Mr. Hiam knows anything about Janet? He's only just come out of St. Antholin's after an accident, I understand."

"Oh, dear," moaned Mrs. Westbrow. "Yes, I suppose I could meet you there. I do know his address, at

least if it is the same, Hayworth Mansions. Yes, you can't go alone, Kent. This is all very disturbing. It won't take me long to get there. I think perhaps you may be right, but I thought that old affair had blown over long ago."

Pat breathed a sigh as they emerged from the telephone box.

"I don't think that is quite the way for a respectable doctor to behave in a telephone box," she said, smoothing her collar. "And she does agree with me, Kent. Janet did come to see him in the hospital, and she was upset about it, and she did bring the conversation round to him the other night when we were talking, but I didn't think there was anything in it."

Hayworth Mansions was a large modern block of flats overlooking Regents Park. Pat and Kent had not been waiting at the entrance for many moments before a taxi drew up, and Mrs. Westbrow stepped out of it.

"I asked Pat to come along," said Kent coolly, as she showed surprise at the girl's appearance.

A smoothly-running lift took them up to a long corridor with doors of different colours.

"This is really rather embarrassing," murmured Mrs. Westbrow to Pat, as Kent pressed the bell. "Suppose she isn't there, what shall we say? Or if she is——"

There was the sound of quick footsteps, and the door opened. Janet stood there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IN that slight pause, Janet was the first to recover.

"Hullo, Mother," she said, leaning forward calmly to kiss Mrs. Westbrow's cheek. "I rather thought you would be along when you had had time to think. Hullo, Kent. And Pat! Come in, all of you."

They stepped into a small square hall from which opened a masculine sitting-room. On one couch at right angles to the fitted electric fire, was Terry Hiam, his foot in its plaster casing resting on a stool. Newspapers were strewn around him, cigarette ash filled a small tray, there were used coffee-cups on a low table. There was an atmosphere of homeliness which astonished Pat in connection with the flighty Janet.

"Well, really, Janet, I think it's too bad of you," began Mrs. Westbrow, advancing into the room. "We didn't know what in the world had happened to you. You might at least have telephoned."

"You'd better sit down," said Janet lightly.

Pat went to a chair by the window and Kent stood beside her.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, sit down and don't all look like avenging angels," said Janet crossly.

She had a new air of confidence, Pat noticed.

"And Kent too, we've all been worried about you. I don't know what your father will say."

Janet curled herself up on the couch opposite to

Terry, and tucked her feet under her as if she were quite at home.

"~~He~~ wasn't to know until Terry and I were married. It's just the question of the special licence. And actually your ring is in the post on its way back to you," Janet insisted.

She turned her head over her shoulder to smile at Kent.

As usual, thought Pat, his expression gave little away.

"I couldn't stand it, you know," she said confidingly. "I thought it would be fun at first with you, and of course there was all that excitement when you came back from the expedition, but lately—I knew I couldn't go through with it. Even if you had been in love with me."

Mrs. Westbrow, in spite of her smart hair-cut, her elegant clothes, had a natural shrillness in her outraged tone.

"What a thing to say to Kent! The nicest man you've ever had."

"You didn't think of telling me?" said Kent quietly.

Terry Hiam's drawl broke into the conversation with assurance.

"How about my side of the story? Cigarette, Doctor? And the pretty red-head my Janet was so jealous of?"

Pat drew a sharp breath. She found the brown leather chair in which she was sitting too large and deep for her. She did not know whether to laugh or to explode at the calmness of Janet and Terry Hiam, at the situation. Then she realized that they were alike in their demand that life should always give them what they wanted. He was her match.

"It's all very well, Mother," Janet went on. "I've toed the line and tried to be a success the way Dad

wanted, and it never came off. And I thought at last I'd have what I wanted, and do what I liked. I didn't know about Terry until he was at St. Antholin's, and yesterday I suddenly felt so miserable that I couldn't stand it. Nina was so darned complacent about her life, and Pat——"

She stopped and Pat flushed deeply. She wondered as she met the other girl's glance whether Janet had seen her with Kent, then she raised her head proudly, glorying in her love for him.

"Pat was always the centre of things wherever she went, at St. Antholin's, anywhere. She made me mad. And all I had was Terry. So I came here to see him yesterday——"

"If you want to know, she's nearly badgered the life out of me," said Terry Hiam lazily. "Marched in on me, lock, stock and barrel. Made up our old quarrel, took advantage of my masculine weakness and my physical disability, and there you are."

He dared to wink at Pat.

"Mrs. Westbrow," he went on, "I'm sorry if we've given you any anxiety, but it's all plain sailing now. I can keep her in a style that she'll get used to, and this accident has put paid to my racing for a while."

Janet gave him a little anxious glance.

"He does need someone to look after him," she said. "I knew he'd be here on his own. That's why I had to come."

Pat began to laugh. The light gay sound made the others look at her.

"Janet, you fraud," she said.

Somewhere in that hard little core of what Janet called her heart there must be some tenderness.

"I suppose this calls for drinks all round," said Terry, as if awakening to his rôle of host. "Janet, raid the bottle-cupboard. No ill feeling, Doctor? Mother-in-law-to-be, relax."

Pat realized that Kent had been standing by her chair, that he had said hardly a word since their arrival.

"I'll drink to Janet's happiness with the best will in the world," he said cordially. "A word of warning in advance might have saved a lot of trouble."

"How did I know what was going to happen to me?" snapped Janet. "And I'd never had a minute to think."

"Get the stuff, honey," said Terry with decision which Janet obeyed mechanically.

Pat followed Janet out of the room into a modern kitchenette.

"There's just one thing I want to know," she said quickly. "You did know about Kent and—and I? Did the children say something to you? On Sunday morning?"

Janet was getting glasses out of a cupboard as if she knew the way about this establishment. She did not answer. She had her back to Pat.

"I didn't mean to make you unhappy——" began Pat.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," snapped Janet. "I don't blame a girl for going for the man she wants. And I don't know what you're talking about. I came back because of Terry."

Pat was not quite sure that she was speaking the truth.

Then she realized that Janet could never endure the thought that she was not wanted. If she had suspected the attraction of Kent for Pat, if she had heard some

word from the children, or even seen Pat and Kent on the bridge at the end of the garden, she would never admit it. The thought would be too painful to her vanity.

And mixed with that there might be the relief of rushing off to take refuge with a man she might love in her own way.

Pat watched Janet opening a tin of cocktail biscuits, spilling olives and almonds into little dishes.

"I've known him for years, and my father put his foot down, but he can't stop me now," said Janet defiantly.

Pat might reproach Janet with the fact that she had insisted that there was an engagement between Lee and herself for her own ends, but what would be the good of it?

Pat felt the joyous relief of the situation too much to want to argue about it.

"Well, I do hope you and Terry will be very happy," she said conventionally. "I suppose really you owe quite a lot to St. Antholin's when you think of it."

Janet smiled, but did not answer as she carried in the tray.

The atmosphere in the sitting-room had changed. Mrs. Westbrow had moved to the couch beside Terry and was asking questions about his accident. Kent swung round from the window to take the tray from Janet. His glance at Pat was full of amusement and happiness.

Janet had solved the problem for them by thinking of herself.

"We shall be flying to Bermuda as soon as Terry is better," she announced, and immediately she and her mother were on the subject of clothes.

Kent turned to look down at Pat.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you," he said, in a low voice. "My friend, the neurologist, went in to see Tom today—"

"But he wasn't due for weeks," exclaimed Pat. "You were going over to New York to get him."

"I know," he nodded. "But Avery moves swiftly. Had to come here earlier than planned, so I rushed him along to Tom. And Tom was easier with me, I don't know why. I shall have a further opinion in a few days, but I think he's hopeful."

Pat felt dazzled. Later on she would tell Kent about Ann's attack on Tom, about his discovery that his cherished image of Janet had fallen far short of the reality of a girl who dared to tell him the truth about himself, about her belief that the release of tension might help Tom in his progress.

"I feel more hopeful about him than I've ever done before," she said softly. "And it's thanks to you."

They were standing by the window, and Pat could see the summer dusk stealing over the trees in the Park, the boats on the dimpled blue-grey water, the green lawns where people strolled together. The sun was setting slowly.

It was so strange and wonderful to be here with Kent, as if they belonged together.

"If I can have your attention," said Terry, handling a long-necked bottle expertly, and interrupting the two conversations with a promising pop.

As he poured the golden liquid into the glasses Janet held out for him, he said: "I'm a bit confused as to what we're all going to drink to—my bride, Willerby's release, your father's return—"

Janet gave a little shiver of apprehension.

"That's why I wanted to get it over before he came back."

"Nonsense," said her mother with spirit. "I really don't see why we shouldn't have a wedding as we planned, Janet——"

Their voices rose in argument.

Terry's stronger tones repeated: "What are we drinking to? To Janet, to Willerby's happy release—I take it that it's happier than I expected—to my red-headed nurse, which shall we choose?"

"There is one thing we could all drink to," said Pat shyly. "Something we've all got in common. You were there, Mrs. Westbrow. And if Mr. Hiam hadn't been there, perhaps Janet would not have——"

"That's it," cried Terry Hiam exultantly. "You'll forgive me rising. You're going to drink to good old St. Antholin's, which led to my downfall. Without it, where should we all be? And, of course, you too, Dr. Willerby."

Pat heard the voices repeating: "St. Antholin's."

Into her mind flashed a vision of the old place, the long corridors, the plane trees shedding their bark in the courtyard, her routine of work, her friends and her sorrows there. Now the name brought joy.

She met Kent's ardent eyes as his glass touched hers, as his hand clasped hers. Her own eyes were misty as she looked from the group beyond him to the window, where the rose-coloured sky was as rose-coloured as her hopes for the future.